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### What is autism? What is ABA?: Building understanding in Autism Awareness Month

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**What is autism? What is ABA?**

**Building understanding in Autism Awareness Month**



*By Dr. Julyse A. Migan-Gandonou Horr*

April 11, 2022

For more information, contact OBU's news bureau at [newsbureau@obu.edu](mailto:newsbureau@obu.edu) or (870) 245-5208.

ARKADELPHIA, Ark. – April has traditionally been known worldwide as Autism Awareness Month, and is a time to focus on increasing understanding and awareness of people with autism. In 2021, the Autism Society of America changed the designated terminology to Autism Acceptance Month. Regardless of which name you use, I hope you'll take time this month to become educated on autism and help to create a more inclusive and accepting world for the autism community. Here is some introductory information to get you started.

What is autism?

- Autism is a pervasive developmental disability that typically appears during early childhood and is characterized (according to the “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition”) by “persistent differences in communication, interpersonal relationships and social

interaction across different environment” and “restricted and repetitive behavior, patterns, activities and interests”

- Autism currently has no known single cause; however, research comparing brain scans of neurotypical children to those of children with autism suggests that it may be caused by abnormalities in brain structure or function.
- Individuals diagnosed with autism may be non-verbal or have atypical speech, have trouble understanding nonverbal communication (i.e., social cues) and have difficulty making and maintaining social relationships.
- Individuals with autism may also engage in echolalic behavior (e.g., repeating sound and phrases), repetitive body movements (e.g., body rocking, hand flapping), difficulty with transitions or changes in routine, rigid or highly restricted interests and extreme sensitivity to sensory stimulation.
- Autism is a spectrum disorder, and individuals diagnosed with autism engage in behaviors that fall anywhere on the spectrum. Not all individuals with autism are non-verbal; however, communication and social skills differences remain a hallmark of autism.
- According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, autism currently affects 1 in 44 children and 1 in 45 adults; for perspective, the prevalence rate of autism in 2020 was 1 in 54 children and was 1 in 125 in 2004.
- According to the CDC, about 1% of the world population has autism spectrum disorder, and more than 3.5 million Americans live with the disorder.
- Currently, boys are four times more likely to be diagnosed with autism than girls.
- Although the rate of autism is on the rise, much more is known about it today than 20 years ago.
- Autism currently has no known cure; however, research shows that early diagnosis of autism can lead to early treatment and early intervention, which in turn can lead to improved quality of life.
- One of the most effective and commonly used treatments for autism spectrum disorder is applied behavior analysis (ABA).

What is ABA?

- ABA is the science of behavior and learning; it involves the systematic application of basic behavioral principles such as positive reinforcement to improve behavior of social significance. When used to treat behavioral disorders, including autism, it is referred to as ABA-based therapy, or ABA therapy.
- The U.S. Surgeon General, the American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics (among others) recommend ABA therapy as an effective evidence-based treatment of choice for autism spectrum disorders.
- When used as a treatment for autism and other behavioral disorders, ABA therapy is a person-centered approach that involves behavioral assessment, behavioral intervention using evidence-based behavioral-analytic techniques, ongoing data-based evaluation and progress monitoring and training of the individual’s parents/caregivers, teachers and stakeholders.
- Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBA@s/BCBA@-Ds) are master’s- and doctoral-level professionals who are trained in ABA and are nationally certified (and in many states, state licensed) to provide ABA therapy.
- ABA therapy is typically used in conjunction with other therapies (e.g., occupational therapy, speech therapy).
- Many types of private health insurance providers are required to cover ABA therapy.
- When ABA therapy is prescribed as a medically-necessary treatment by a doctor, all Medicaid plans are required to cover it for children younger than 21.

Ouachita Baptist University’s Master of Science degree program in applied behavior analysis is the first in the state of Arkansas. This low-residency, 36-hour program is designed to prepare you for a career as a compassionate, science-informed BCBA who will use research-based strategies to design and implement

behavioral interventions for individuals with disorders such as autism. To learn more about the program, contact Dr. Julyse Horr, director of Ouachita's applied behavior analysis program, at [horrj@obu.edu](mailto:horrj@obu.edu) or at (870) 245-4893.

*Sources: The Autism Society of America, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Behavior Analyst Certification Board and Autism Speaks.*