Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Verbal Behavior
By Mary Barbera

As a lead consultant for the Pennsylvania Verbal Behavior Project, I have found there is a need for some basic information about Verbal Behavior programming. In a question and answer format, I will attempt to cover basic information for parents and professionals.

What is Verbal Behavior programming?

Verbal Behavior programming is guided by the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). In addition to using ABA principles, a Verbal Behavior (VB) practitioner also incorporates BF Skinner's Analysis of Verbal Behavior.

In 1957, BF Skinner published an important book entitled, Verbal Behavior. Skinner described language as a behavior and illustrated how language could be taught using the principles of operant conditioning. He also expanded the definition of verbal behavior to include any behavior mediated by a listener. A child using sign language to make a request, imitating clapping of hands, or having a tantrum because he didn't get his way are all considered Verbal Behavior according to Skinner's Analysis.

Unfortunately Skinner's book was largely ignored for decades until Dr. Jack Michael and his students, Mark Sundberg and James Partington began to apply it with great success many years later.

What is the ABLLS and how does it relate to Verbal Behavior programming?

The ABLLS is an acronym for a book entitled, Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills. It was written by Drs. Mark Sundberg and James Partington and published in 1998. This book is an assessment, curriculum guide, and skills tracking system for children with autism or other developmental disabilities. VB practitioners utilize the ABLLS to assess a child's level in 26 different domains. A parent and/or a teacher who is very familiar with the child can complete this assessment. The ABLLS can be completed every 3 to 6 months after the initial assessment serving as an excellent tracking system of the child's progress. Also in 1998, Drs. Sundberg and Partington published Teaching Language to Children with Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, which gives an excellent overview of the VB terminology and techniques. These books, based on Skinner's analysis of Verbal Behavior, finally brought VB techniques into programs to educate children with autism.

How does a Verbal Behavior model differ from a Lovaas or discrete trial model?

A traditional ABA model such as the one pioneered by Dr. Ivaar Lovaas stresses compliance training, imitation skills and building receptive language for young, non-vocal early learners. The VB model, on the other hand, looks first at what the child wants and then teaches the child

how to request (in VB terms, how to mand). Initially that may involve only the child reaching for the item to indicate interest. The child quickly learns that if they use "verbal behavior" or reaching in this case, to indicate interest in something, they get the item. Many VB consultants also recommend the use of sign language for most non-vocal early learners while Lovaas consultants rarely recommend signing as a first step. Another key difference is that VB is much more child-led.   Also, early skills, such as manding, are usually taught away from a table and in the natural environment as much as possible. Both Lovaas programs and VB programs are based on the principles of ABA so there are many similarities as well as a few key differences.

I keep hearing VB terms like manding, tacting, and intraverbals. My child can say 10 words, how does that relate to the VB model?

While most traditional speech therapists and ABA practitioners break language into receptive and expressive categories, BF Skinner and later Drs. Sundberg and Partington broke language down even further. They realized that children with severe language impairments did not follow the normal developmental sequence for acquiring language. Furthermore, they realized that many children with autism had very scattered skills. One child with autism may be able to verbally label (in VB terms, tact) 100 items. That same child, who may be able to say "cookie" when presented with a picture of a cookie, could not ask for (or mand) for cookie when she wanted one. That child could also not say the word cookie or even point to a cookie if you said, "you eat a _____". This fill-in-the-blank is an intraverbal in VB terminology. The child could also not say "cookie" if you said, "say cookie". So his verbal imitation skills were also very poor. This child's profile could be exactly opposite from the next child's ABLLS.

Getting back to your child who says 10 words, utilizing the VB model and the ABLLS, you would have to describe the 10 words your child can verbally say. Can he make one-word requests or label items? Can he complete fill-in-the -blanks or can he imitate words or phrases? These are all-important skills and need to be assessed and programmed for differently.

How can I learn more about Verbal Behavior programming?

Dr. Mark Sundberg and James Partington reside in California but do make presentations on the East Coast a few times per year. If you have the opportunity, I would recommend attending a Sundberg or Partington workshop. I would also recommend training workshops with Dr. Vincent Carbone and his associates (see drcarbone.net). Dr. Carbone utilizes the ABLLS and is a great VB presenter. Parents of Autistic Children (poac.net) based in NJ, also offers many free VB trainings. Parents in PA have recently formed a Chapter of POAC in PA and will also be offering free trainings. Finally, the website, verbalbehaviornetwork.org is a wonderful resource for both parents and professionals.