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ABA Consultation in Schools: When Roles, Professional situations, and Ethics Collide

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Session Objectives

- Identify and discuss professional role that BCBAs play when providing ABA consultation in schools
- Examine conflicting ethical and professional codes occurring during ABA consultation in schools
- Engage in discussion with colleagues about commonly occurring ethical dilemmas

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What is the Problem?


- Values of professionals/service providers often conflict in school settings. How do we navigate this as BCBAS?
 - Example: PBIS places emphasis on family centered, culturally sensitive services. ABA focused on scientifically validated approaches and strict provider and client relationships. What do we do when these values collide?
- Personal values and compliance guidelines

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Challenging Behavior: What Do We Already Know?


- Challenging behavior is communication.
- Important to understand WHY a behavior is occurring. What is causing this behavior to happen? What is maintaining engagement in this behavior?
- Function of behavior is important.
- Interventions that are based on function are more likely to be rooted in reinforcement.

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Factors Affecting Behavior Intervention for Challenging Behaviors

- Contextual Fit of Intervention and classroom.
- Training
- Staff to student ratio
- Resources
- School culture around inclusion of students with challenging behavior

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Potential Ethical Issues

- Designing and implementing interventions without adequate assessment
- Lack of resources necessary to implement interventions with fidelity
- Restraint
- Seclusion
- Designing and implementing intervention rooted in punishment procedures prior to exhausting all antecedent, preventative interventions

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What Does Being “Ethical” Mean?

- Is it what a “good person” would do in this situation?
- Is it what the BACB Compliance Code says you should do in this situation?
- Is it what an educator or special educator would do in this situation?

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Guidance vs. Compliance

- Prior to 2016, BCBA’s operated under the “Guidelines for Responsible Conduct for Behavior Analysts” provided by the BACB.
- In 2016, these guidelines became a code of conduct call the “Professional and Ethical Compliance Code for Behavior Analysts.”
- The BACB states “the code will be enforceable in its own right and in its entirety.”

What does this mean for us as BCBA’s?

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“...treating ethical rules as immutable ends in themselves, separating them from the ethical ideals (i.e., the principles and virtues) they were designed to reflect and support, can turn rules into obstacles rather than facilitators of ethical ideals such as respect, fairness, caring, beneficence, and avoidance of harm.”

Pettifor, Sinclair, & Falendar (2014)

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Is it Always Black and White?

- As a BCBA, have you ever...
 - Accepted a cup of coffee from a client’s family?
 - Helped a school teacher with a behavior that you do not have experience with because you are the school district’s behavior specialist and this is your job?
 - Implemented intervention based on the wants of a family and not based upon assessment?

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What is “Ethical Behavior” in a Given Situation?


- Is it what YOU would do?
- Is it what a PROFESSIONAL should do?
- Is it what an PBIS practitioner should do?
- Is it what a BCBA should do?

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The Definition of “Ethical”


- As practitioners, we need to be careful about our usage of the word “ethical,” especially when dealing with other professionals. People often make the equation of...

Ethical = Good Person
 Unethical = Bad Person

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The GREY Area

- There are many ethical dilemmas that are not black and white.
 - Two guidelines may conflict
 - You may be working under several ethical codes which may conflict
 - There may be contextual factors that you feel argue for an ethical resolution that conflicts with a guidelines or multiple guidelines.

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What ethical dilemmas have you encountered that were in the grey area?

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What kind of decision is this?

- Is this dilemma a Right vs Right decision?

- Is this dilemma a Right vs Wrong decision?

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What Do We Do Next?

- What do we do when there is not a black and white, clear cut answer to how we should act in situations with ethical concerns?
- How do we make an “ethical” decision?

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A Process

1. Why does this trigger my ethical radar?
2. Brainstorm solutions
3. Evaluate solutions
 - Client safety, dignity, outcomes, self determination
 - Impact on relationships
 - Family preferences
4. Have you found an acceptable solution?
5. Make a decision and implement with fidelity
6. Reflect upon the results and evaluate

Rosenberg & Schwartz, 2017

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Evaluating Solutions: Things to Consider

- Student safety
- Student dignity and self-determination
- Impact on your relationships
- Student outcomes
- Family preferences
- Cultural norms and beliefs

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Case Study- Assessment

Margo is a BCBA working for a large urban school district. A student was recently referred to you because of challenging behavior who does not have an IEP, but has a 504 plan. The other members of the school team balk when you suggest a FBA. “She doesn’t need one, she does not have IEP.” How do you proceed?

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Case Study- Scientifically Supported Treatments

Tonya is an early childhood specialist and a BCBA. As part of her job at an early childhood center, she works at homes with families. She has been spending a great deal of time with one of her families, who has a four-year-old with ASD. The family has had a very difficult time adjusting to their son’s diagnosis, and in particular, has been very apprehensive about using applied behavior analytic techniques. The mom, in particular, had a very negative initial experience with ABA, considering the ABA consultant (prior to Tonya) over –opinioned and dogmatic and the therapy demeaning and non-childlike. Tonya has been working very hard to gain the mother’s trust and she feels that she has slowly been making progress. At their most recent meeting mom tells her excitedly that she has just gone to a full day workshop on Floortime. She thought it was fantastic, and she wants to incorporate it into her son’s school program. She gives Tonya the book on Floortime and asks Tonya if she could start incorporating Floortime into Tonya’s work with her son. Tonya doesn’t know a lot about Floortime, but she’s pretty sure it’s not scientifically supported. How should Tonya handle this situation?

Potentially relevant BCBA Guidelines: 2.09 (a) (d)

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Case Study- Assessment

Joshua is a teacher and also a BCBA. He teaches 7th grade. One of the students in his home room has begun to demonstrate significant challenging behavior. Joshua has started collecting data in his class and is working on a preliminary hypothesis about the function of the behavior. Joshua just received an invitation to a meeting about this student and when he arrived the school psychologist presents a FBA about this student. He has completed the school district form including the checkboxes that the district requires you to complete to determine the function of the behavior. Joshua is concerned about calling this process a FBA and asks about what data have been collected. The school psychologist says that he has interviewed a couple people and that is sufficient to meet the district requirements. Joshua is concerned about the quality of the assessment, what should he do?

Potentially relevant BCBA Guidelines: 3.01, 4.03

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Case Study- Inadequate Resources

Martin is a BCBA and a 5th grade teacher. He has a classroom of students with significant disabilities. Most of the kids have intense needs and many have a variety of challenging behaviors. Martin has been given very little para-educator support for the classroom and the one para-educator who has been assigned has received very little training. Martin is so busy trying to oversee the needs of all the students that he has had little time to provide training for the para-educator himself. One of Martin's students, Selma, has exhibited some significant challenging behaviors over the past year. Martin did a functional behavior assessment and concluded that Selma's challenging behaviors are primarily attention-based. Martin believes he has a plan to effectively address Selma's problem behavior and teach her some new appropriate behaviors, but he feels he cannot do it with the resources he currently has. He simply doesn't have the bandwidth to give Selma the attention she needs, particularly during the beginning stages of the plan, and he doesn't have the time or opportunity to provide the support and training that his para-educator would need. Martin has talked to his principal about the problem and has been told that there are no funds available for additional support. What should Martin do?

Potentially relevant BCBA Guidelines: 2.04 (d), 2.09 (b)

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Case Study: Multiple Relationships and Cultural Sensitivity

Rachel is a special education teacher and a BCBA who works in an urban school district. She works for a public school and is the lead teacher in a program that provides a combination of inclusive preschool and intensive instruction to young children with ASD. As part of this program, Rachel conducts monthly home visits for all the children in the program. Many of the families with whom she works offer Rachel tea, snacks, and small gifts of food when she visit. One family, recently immigrated to the US, always offers and seems very offended if Rachel refuses. The family has also invited Rachel to join them to celebrate the child's birthday and other special cultural events. Rachel has been trying hard to develop a positive working relationship with his family and she understands that offering food is a sign of respect in this family's culture. She is concerned that participating in these events or accepting food may not be appropriate, but on the other hand, she is concerned that if she is too formal with this family, they many not be willing to work with her and the quality of the child's program will be affected. What should Rachel do?

Potentially relevant BCBA Guidelines: 1.06 (a) (d)

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Case Study- Working Well with Colleagues

Drew is a BCBA who works in a large urban district. At the school where Drew works, staff are assigned to four-person interdisciplinary teams that consist of an educator/BCBA, speech-language pathologist, occupational therapist, and a social worker. Other members (e.g., physical therapists) are brought on to the team as needed as consultants. One of Drew's colleagues, who is the occupational therapist on the team, recently attended a workshop on sensory integration and now wants to incorporate some of the sensory integration activities (e.g., providing deep pressure, sitting on a therapy ball during group activities) into the activities at the center. Many of the children seem to "enjoy" the activities and now the therapist wants to implement these strategies more broadly. Drew is worried about how to navigate this situation. He recently read a study that showed no effect from some of these sensory integration activities. What advice would you give Drew?

Potentially relevant BCBA Guidelines: 2.03 (b), 2.09 (a)



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Case Study- Challenging Behaviors

Sylvia is a BCBA that works for a school district. She was recently called to consult on a case where the teacher was sending children to sit in a closet when they were "acting out". The teacher stated this wasn't seclusion because the closet door was unlocked. The teacher reported that she has tried everything and nothing worked as well as being able to tell the children if they did not shape up that they would have to spend time in the closet. The teacher said she has been using this technique for 20 years and she has never had a compliant. Sylvia is not quite sure where to begin with this teacher. What would you advise?

Potentially relevant BCBA Guidelines 4.03, 4.09
