

Field Report

Living the Behavioral Dream

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Most of us have had a workday where we left a bit frustrated about one thing or another and thought “if I was in charge, I know I could do it better.” We dream of a better tomorrow where we tell our employer goodbye and become our own boss. Is that not the American Dream? We are told from early childhood that anything is possible and we can be anything we want to be if we just work hard. Somewhere between those naive childhood years and today we probably have come to realize these grand promises are more myths than truths and we become content with an approximation of this dream. To some individuals, however, approximations are not close enough.

Karen Harper began her career in the field of developmental disabilities some 20 years ago, long before behavior analysis hit the mainstream. Sure behavioral principles were in place here and there, but the day-to-day care plans were laden with unscientific treatments that were more the result of staff “ideas” than proven principles of behavior change. Like many around her, Karen stumbled into the field of behavior analysis through nationwide initiatives to move the developmentally disabled from state operated large congregate care facilities to more inclusive community-based group homes. With the increasingly challenging population came a need for increased sophistication of treatment approaches. Many developmental disability care providers began turning to the successes found in behavioral interventions and some even nudged their staff to further their education specifically in behavior analysis. Karen happened to be in the right place at the right

time and thus obtained a master’s degree in behavior analysis in 1999. Keep in mind this was still before the BACB® existed.

Back at the grind with a wealth of new knowledge, Karen held a variety of positions across a variety of agencies, mostly in the capacity of “encouraging” direct care and clinical staff to try out some behavioral approaches toward treatment. Some staff listened better than others and some clients got better while others stayed the same. As many frontline BCBA’s know, good behavioral knowledge and skills are only going to take you so far. To succeed you need to win staff over so that they actually do what you say even when you are not their boss. Somehow they have to believe you and trust that if they work harder for no extra pay, that down the road the person with disabilities will get better. The good BCBA will have more successes than failures, but those failures—they keep you up at night and

make you wonder if that American Dream had any fraction of reality in it. One of those nights Karen Harper decided to find out.

In 2009, Karen walked away from her full-time job with a great salary and benefits and threw all caution to the wind. She was determined and confident she could do better than the status quo. Instead of being a behavior analyst in an existing organization she had the

vision of making an entire organization behavior analysts. From the top down, behavior analysis would be the driving philosophy of the company. ABA of Illinois was formed.

Karen convinced three of her coworkers to follow her and as they operated from a home office, over the past 4 years

they built a company that today employs 49 staff and serves over 1,000 clients across the state of Illinois and southern Wisconsin. Most of the business focuses on providing behavioral expertise to community care providers for adults with developmental disabilities. With the movement into the community many local providers do not have the funds or the necessity to hire a full-time BCBA. Karen's alternative is to contract her company to provide the behavioral assessments, write treatment plans, and train staff. And the best part, are you ready for this? the services are free to the agency. Yes free. Through a state funding mechanism, behavioral services are reimbursable through the state for each client served in the community. Karen provides the service, the state pays, and the agency wins. For once it seems



that the politics of human rights got it right.

I spent some time with Karen recently and asked her why she has not jumped on the autism wave. Most of my students want careers in autism and the need is surely there for services. Karen gave me a refreshing answer that I will never forget. She said, "The need is so great for adults with disabilities.

Their lives can be so empty and it only takes a little

reorganization of their treatment plans to make a big difference. We can do this and make things better. I can't give that up."

What does the future hold for ABA of IL? Surprisingly not aggressive growth. Instead, Karen wants to focus on quality. She wants to rise above any other provider in terms of sophistication and effectiveness. Given what she

has already accomplished, my money's on Harper.

We live in great times for being a behavior analyst. The demand for services typically is greater than the supply. Many people approximating good clinicians are trying to get in the game. Agencies that have no history of behavioral expertise are claiming such. In the sea of hands that raise up when asked who can provide ABA, it's nice to find a group that can really do what they say. We all shake our heads from time to time as we walk out of work wondering if this is the best we can do. Maybe if more of us began to tear off the callouses of adulthood and remember the words of Walt Disney, "all our dreams can come true—if we have the courage to pursue them," we could be like Karen, and live the Behavioral Dream.



SwRI's Behavior Breakthroughs™

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BOTTOM LINE

While this is not one of the highly rated products from this corner, I do want to give credit to the pioneers developing and consulting on it as this is an important foray into an arena which we, as a field, badly need to boldly go. This is an interesting first attempt at creating a lifelike simulation in which the end-user is a parent having to utilize behavioral skills to manage problem behavior. As our field grows globally, these kinds of training options are going to become more relevant and important. I consider this a great first swing, even if it is ultimately a miss. I hope that SwRI continues to develop and refine this program by dropping the multiple choice and adding more nuanced controls to provide the end-user the kind of experience they will encounter when shaping behavior.

Behavior Breakthroughs™ has recently released Level 2 of its iPhone app and appears to be ratcheting up their marketing of it, so now it seems timely to review this innovative software training application of behavior analysis principles.

The program is described as an “interactive training simulation created for parents and caregivers of children and adults who display challenging behavior.” And its goal is to “provide parents and caregivers with an opportunity to learn and practice reinforcing skills they want to see increase and use extinction to reduce rates of behaviors they would like to see decrease.”

Computer simulation training is an area that behavior analysts should be using in our training of both upcoming behavior analysts and those with no behavioral training. This is a laudable goal! If parents could learn how to use reinforcement and extinction well, families around the world would experience a significant increase in quality of life.

There are 6 levels that aim to teach reinforcement, extinction, shaping, correction, chaining, prompt fading, errorless teaching, and discrete trials. Installation was quick and easy. I had already used the iPhone app (now includes up to Level 2), and so was excited to discover the various extras included in the desktop application. You hear a loud crash and are presented with a 5-year-old child, Asa, who has apparently just broken a lamp and is now screaming and tantruming. The scream-track is an aversive looping audio that quickly becomes aversive. On the left side of the screen are three options: *Say Something* [“Stop that,” “What’s wrong with you?,” “Good quiet,” “You know better than that.”], *Action* [give candy], and *Ignore* [you turn away from the child]. Clicking the correct option results in a winning chime and an incorrect yields a loud buzz. If only all children with autism came with multiple choice options, parenting, and behavior analysis might be much easier.

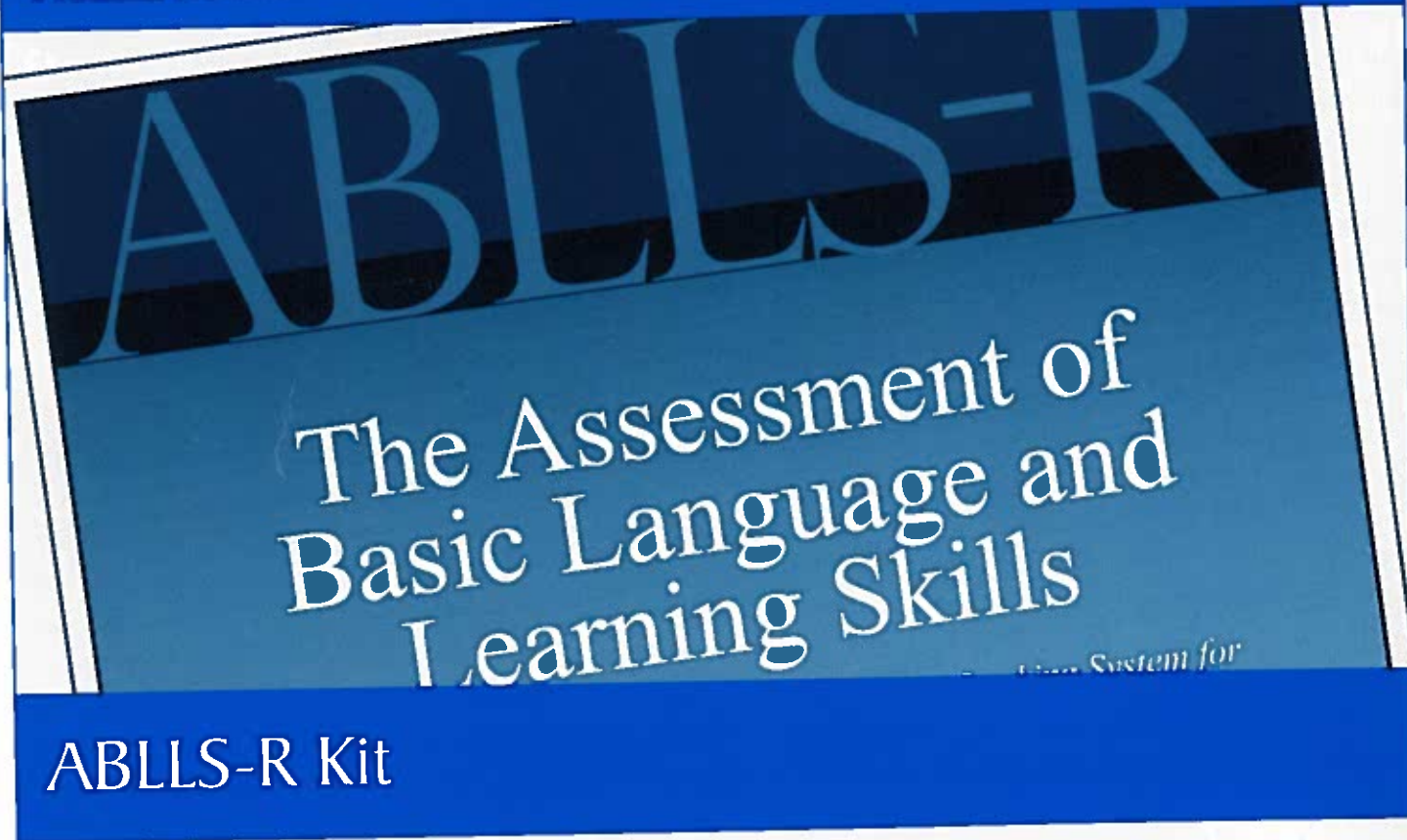
Appetitive: The value of this software can be found in its innovation and entry into a space that behavior analysts desperately need joined. Unfortunately, its utility as a training tool is not apparent, and research should be conducted to ascertain if there is any benefit. The research I could find indicated that new teachers said it made them more comfortable, but there was no measure of whether they performed any differently because of

the program. Personally, I think it may be of most help in a demonstrative role to supplement training of new staff members and parents. Some users said it was helpful during staff training by having staff members play the game in a public space with the volume turned up extremely loud. Presumably, this will help them learn to deal with the discomfort of working with children with autism. Your mileage may vary.

Aversive: There are some violations of important behavioral principles, mainly that of temporal contiguity. I was still credited for “reinforcing” even 3 minutes after the child had emitted the mand. It wasn’t until Level 6 that timing entered the equation at all. Putting the behavioral incoherence aside, my biggest concern is the potential for this game to negatively impact public perception of ABA-based therapy. It oversimplifies problems (and I get that you have to, for a game), which may offend parents who are living a horrendously stressful, complex, and unappreciated role as the “autism momma or papa.” The fact that Asa stands in one spot for sustained periods (instead of running amok), his tantrums are simply crying (rather than aggression toward self or others) and that he learns so quickly (one to two trials and he acquires a vocal mand) in-game could make it appear that our field just doesn’t understand behavior problems associated with autism and do not have much to contribute. On the other hand, if it does not drive parents away, it may drive them to the behavior basics website FAQ, which provides brief descriptions of the principles and procedures in the game. This could be the beginning of a good thing.

Overall Experience: You can move around the house with your keyboard and look around with your mouse. However, there is no purpose in doing those (as far as game play). It does allow you to examine the house and discover a huge framed picture of B. F. Skinner’s face hanging crookedly on the wall, food out on the counters, Crayola scribbles on the wall, and a shirt in the toilet. I’m not sure that is the message we want to send parents of how we view the home life of a child with autism. Additionally, the graphics are reminiscent of Wolfenstein 3D and at times Asa’s movement was downright creepy.

Price: At one point, I believe it was \$50–99 for the desktop version, which is no longer available on Amazon.



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BOTTOM LINE

If you find yourself with lots of free time and you enjoy shopping for excellent deals, this kit may not be for you. Alternatively, if you have a waiting list and find yourself booked from dawn to dusk seeing clients and doing assessments, the time this kit saves may be worth the cash. If you are a behavior analyst (or even if not) who routinely delivers ABLLS-R assessments as a product, this kit will probably pay for itself in short order. It would be ideal for the behavior analysts who consult with teams by conducting assessments and drafting a report to give teams who then develop IEPs and home programs. Additionally, a large agency or school could benefit from a community kit that could be used specifically for assessments throughout the year by many different classrooms and professionals. If, on the other hand, you are a BCBA providing consultation to home services and will work with a child for many hours in their home, it may be just as helpful to utilize stimuli and objects found in their home and community environment. The rating is only a 3.5 because this product is literally a box of toys and assessment stimuli that are available for sale individually all over the Internet. However, the inclusion of the guide to integrate these items into a behavioral assessment and the convenience it offers a bustling behavior analyst may make this a tool you should check out.

The Different Roads to Learning kit included the ABLLS-R protocol and guide plus the entirety of materials needed to conduct each task of the protocol. The following components comprise this kit:

100+ Common Objects, the Language Builder, Reinforcer Kit, 8 Sets of Basic Flashcards, 11 Sets of Cognitive Flashcards, Counting Bears, Wooden Beads, Peg Board Set, Shape & Form Box, Color Cubes, Block Design Cards, 9-inch Ball, 19 Puzzles, Writing & Art Kit, Activity Workbook Kit, Magnetic Alphabet Board, Clock, Size Sort, Dressing Doll, Sound Tracks, 3 Large Laminated Pictures, and 4 Children's Books.

The kit comes with two rolling crates (the demo kit included orange ones) and a large clear plastic container for the Common Object Kit. I must admit, unpacking the four boxes and looking at all of the various toys, games, and objects was reminiscent of Christmas. The staff at the facility that were testing it with me were also eager to dig in. The fact that the dressing doll is the "Dress me Josh learn-to-dress doll" was a happy coincidence. Or was it? The boxes contain a sheet of stickers that has which items go with which ABLLS-R task. After affixing those to the correct objects and kits, I packed away the whole thing into the rolling crates. If I were having to transport this by foot across long distances, I might wish that it was just one big duffle bag or suitcase (having two milk crates plus carrying a plastic container might be difficult). However, this was going to be used in a center, so we had no difficulty getting them to and from all the classrooms.

In addition to my examination of the kit, I handed it to two behavior techs who had never conducted an ABLLS-R™ and may not have even opened the guide/protocol book prior to receiving the kit. They began conducting the assessment and the chief complaint was difficulty determining which kit items were necessary

for which tasks in the protocol. Once directed to the ABLLS-R Kit suggestions for Use developed by Stacey Asay for Different Roads to Learning (and included), they found the organization was suddenly very handy! Overall novice behavior techs were able to complete four early learner ABLLS-R assessments spending between 4–8 hours on each.

Appetitive: Since the original ABLLS was created in the late '70s, it included some tasks that needed stimuli, which are now difficult to find. More specifically, some of the puzzles required a certain number of pieces and a shaped outline. This kit includes those! It is unclear how important those specific puzzles are to understanding the ability of a child to learn and use language, but as far as comprehensiveness, it fits the bill. Additionally, the kit includes a Suggestions for Use booklet that guides a new user of the kit in how the specific items in the kit can/should be used for specific tasks in the assessment. A final, and perhaps most important benefit of using a single kit is standardization of your assessments. This can become especially important as you do follow-up checks because it will help ensure that any changes detected are more likely due to teaching variables rather than an artifact of different stimuli for trials in the assessment. For those practitioners who may be interested in conducting research, it is also a handy method to control for any differences across people whom you may be assessing. The Suggestions for Use is useful, especially for someone using the kit the first few times.

Aversive: The price can cause sticker shock. However, it is about 66% of the price of similar products, so even though it is not cheap, it is a good value relative to others. Some people have complained in online forums about the fact that they have to put the stickers on the objects, so I'll include that as a potential problem, although in reality it is probably good to help familiarize yourself with the items in the kit.

Price: \$1,095.95 Comes in four boxes. A cursory search for similar products yielded two other comparable kits each for sale just under \$1,500.