

# Foreword

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As the sister of a neurodiverse younger brother, I have actively followed the field of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) over the past ten or more years. My interest was partly simple curiosity: I had studied B.F. Skinner in my undergraduate psychology classes and wanted to learn more about this particular branch of the science he helped to found. The interest was also quite personal. Since I was old enough to do so, I have searched for information that could help me better understand and support my brother. He was an early beneficiary of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) when it was passed in 1975. Yet, those benefits were slow to unfold and professionals with the expertise he needed were limited at the time. Doctors were perplexed by my brother's multiple challenges and I remember he and my mother traveling across the state of Massachusetts where we lived, and beyond, seeking answers, strategies, answers, and help. Though he was never diagnosed with autism as a child, there was common agreement that among his differences were autism-related behaviors. Like many siblings of neurodiverse children, the background music of my childhood was Will's unique journey. My family and I loved him; we also knew he needed more.

As an adult working in the field of higher education, I had an unexpected epiphany 12 years ago about what might have made a difference for my brother. When a graduate program in ABA was first established at Endicott College where I work, I was quick to explore not just the program and its courses but the field of ABA itself. When I read the Surgeon General's statement "Thirty years of research demonstrated the efficacy of applied behavioral methods in reducing inappropriate behavior and in increasing communication, learning and appropriate social behavior" (178), I paid even more attention. What could I learn from this field that

would help me be a better sister? Was there information within ABA that could help me better advocate for my brother as he moved into middle age? In the fall of 2012, I enrolled in a graduate class, “Introduction to Applied Behavior Analysis in Special Education.” There I studied the foundational ABA concepts, including “positive reinforcement,” “antecedent,” and “consequence.” I did lab experiments with CyberRat and prepped for exams using flashcards to get the terminology right. As I had hoped, I completed the class with a basic understanding of the field. My real take-away, however, was a sense of wonder, and relief, that there was an entire discipline dedicated to a scientific approach to behavior, a discipline that studied how to improve behaviors that are useful and reduce those that are not. I couldn’t help but ask myself: What would my brother’s life experience have been if the field of ABA had been more established when he was a child? What behaviors might he have learned, or unlearned, through working with a skilled BCBA?

Since that class in 2012, I have continued to watch the discipline of Applied Behavior Analysis evolve as a critical tool in the support of neurodiverse individuals. Once known only in specific settings, the entire profession has become more prominent. Families, practitioners, and educators alike routinely use the terms ABA and BCBA (Board Certified Behavior Analysts) when discussing autism interventions. Public schools now know that BCBA’s bring crucial expertise to special education plans. Not unexpectedly, demand for behavior analysts has increased significantly over the past decade “with a 23 percent increase from 2021 to 2022” (United States employment demand for behavior analysts: 2010–2022). Additionally, academic degrees, at the undergraduate and graduate levels, have sprung up in colleges and universities large and small across the country. In another vote of recognition, since 2019 many insurance plans now cover ABA treatment (Autism Speaks, 2019). Clearly, the profession is enjoying a remarkable renaissance and the resources available to neurodiverse individuals have never been greater.

With all of these successes and recognitions, the field of Applied Behavior Analysis is also at something of a crossroads. With such a rapid increase in visibility, greater light has been focused on the controversial aspects of the discipline’s history. Consensus has been building within the profession that some historical practices were inhumane and unethical, and that current practice should be grounded in compassion and humanity. The Association for Behavior Analysts International (ABAI) has faced those debates directly with their membership and, in 2022, ABAI issued two policy statements that stand fully behind the “personal dignity and worth of every human being” (ABAI, 2022a; 2022b). Such declarations, combined with ABAI’s Commitment to Equity (2020) and the detailed Ethics Code

for Behavior Analysts (Behavior Analyst Certification Board, 2020) signal a movement within the field not just to treat the behavior but to always consider the whole person at the heart of intervention. Within the field over the past five years, there has been burgeoning interest in ways to operationally define, measure, and integrate into practice aspirational dimensions of treatment, including compassionate care (e.g., Taylor et al., 2018; Rohrer & Weiss, 2022; Marchese & Weiss, 2023), cultural responsiveness (e.g., Gatzunis et al., 2023; Wright, 2019), and assent (e.g., Morris et al., 2021). All of these values are foundational, yet they have experienced a resurgence of interest in both research and clinical contexts.

*Neurodiversity and Belonging* is part of the conversation, serving as an intervention, even a disruption, in the field at this crucial moment. As the book title suggests, the lens through which clinicians view neurodiverse individuals has changed and expanded. We must consider how to support individuals, partnering with them and other stakeholders in highly individualized treatment. As a result of the field's values, the training of behavior analysts, and the relationships behavior analysts forge with their neurodiverse clients, behavior analysts are in a unique position to meet this challenge. What exactly this looks like, however, remains to be determined, and requires reflection, dialogue, and consideration. *Neurodiversity and Belonging* charts a path forward into the ways in which behavior analysts can help the individuals with whom they work to be more integrated into their communities and to experience a sense of belonging which allows them to thrive as whole individuals. The section titles of the book reflect the collective dedication by the book's authors to this effort: "Person-Centered Goal Selection," "Comprehensive and Strength-Based Treatment," "Promoting Well-Being and Quality of Life," and "Fostering Community and Belonging." Each of these phrases speaks to the larger opportunity ABA has as a field to impact lives transformationally through its science. The book is filled with discipline-specific information, but also with the voices of neurodiverse individuals and their caregivers, literally allowing them to speak for themselves in terms of their needs/the needs of those they love around community and belonging. Finally, the book closes the loop back to the behavior analyst practitioner with actionable case studies, questions to consider, and other recommendations for turning theory into practice. These resources are a critical and strategic part of the book, aimed at supporting those individuals poised on the precipice of reimagining aspects of their clinical work to include the goal of providing "the persons we serve more connection, more acceptance, and a belonging in the communities where they live" (Chapter 1 of this book, p. 12).

Which brings me back to my brother. Despite the odds, and with few posts to guide him, Will made his way through the public school system

and was able to earn an associate degree from a technical college. After graduating, he worked for 20 years at two part-time jobs, one as a custodian at a local church and the other as a cashier at a nearby grocery store. In both settings, my brother found—and helped to create—a community and sense of belonging that has always struck me as a testament to his unique resilience and strengths, not to mention the goodness of people who look beyond differences to the beauty of each person. Now in his early 50s, my brother lives in a specialized housing setting with other adults and continues to work in a local grocery store. He is known as the “Mayor” of his house because he knows what each of his housemates is up to and keeps his finger on the pulse of that small community. His ability to find ways to feel included, and to include others, inspires me every day.

By all measures, my brother’s story is one of success. At a time when there were few if any science-based supports for neurodiverse individuals, my brother gained an education. He went on to hold one or more jobs his entire adult life. He has built community and created his own sense of belonging in each of those jobs and most currently in his shared home. As *Neurodiversity and Belonging* helps the field of Applied Behavior Analysis address the importance of community and belonging for neurodiverse individuals, and starts to set down the guideposts behavior analysts can use to support that work with their clients, I can’t help but imagine the positive impact such work would have had on my brother during his early and young adult years. I know I am not alone in looking forward to where the field of ABA goes next.