

N E B R A S K A  
autism spectrum disorders  
N E T W O R K

# A Compassionate Approach to Supporting Learners with Challenging Behavior



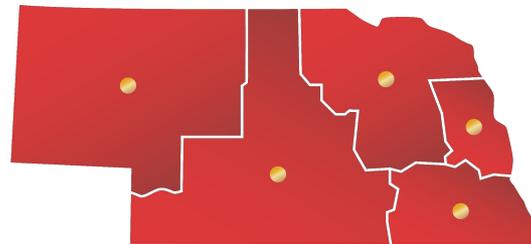
Ali Sweitzer,  
MEd, BCBA  
Metro Region



Sarah Haahr,  
MEd, BCBA, LBA  
Central Region



Kara Coble  
MS, BCBA, LBA  
Southeast Region



N E B R A S K A  
**autism spectrum disorders**  
N E T W O R K



Shorts

**Empathy + Action = Compassion**

# **Soft Skills: The Case for Compassionate Approaches or How Behavior Analysis Keeps Finding Its Heart**



(Rohrer et al., 2021)

The article argues that **compassionate care** and “soft skills” are essential components of effective practice.

**Empathy, active listening, collaboration,** and respectful communication are critical to **building trust & improving outcomes.**

Technical competence alone is not sufficient—ethical, person-centered support requires **intentional compassion in all interactions.**

Toward Compassion in  
the Assessment and  
Treatment of Severe  
Problem Behavior.  
*Behavior Analysis in  
Practice*



(Ghaemmaghmi et al., 2024)

In this article the authors' provide guidance on how to shift assessment and treatment practices toward greater **compassion** by attending to clients' experiences, preferences, and dignity — not just behavioral outcomes.

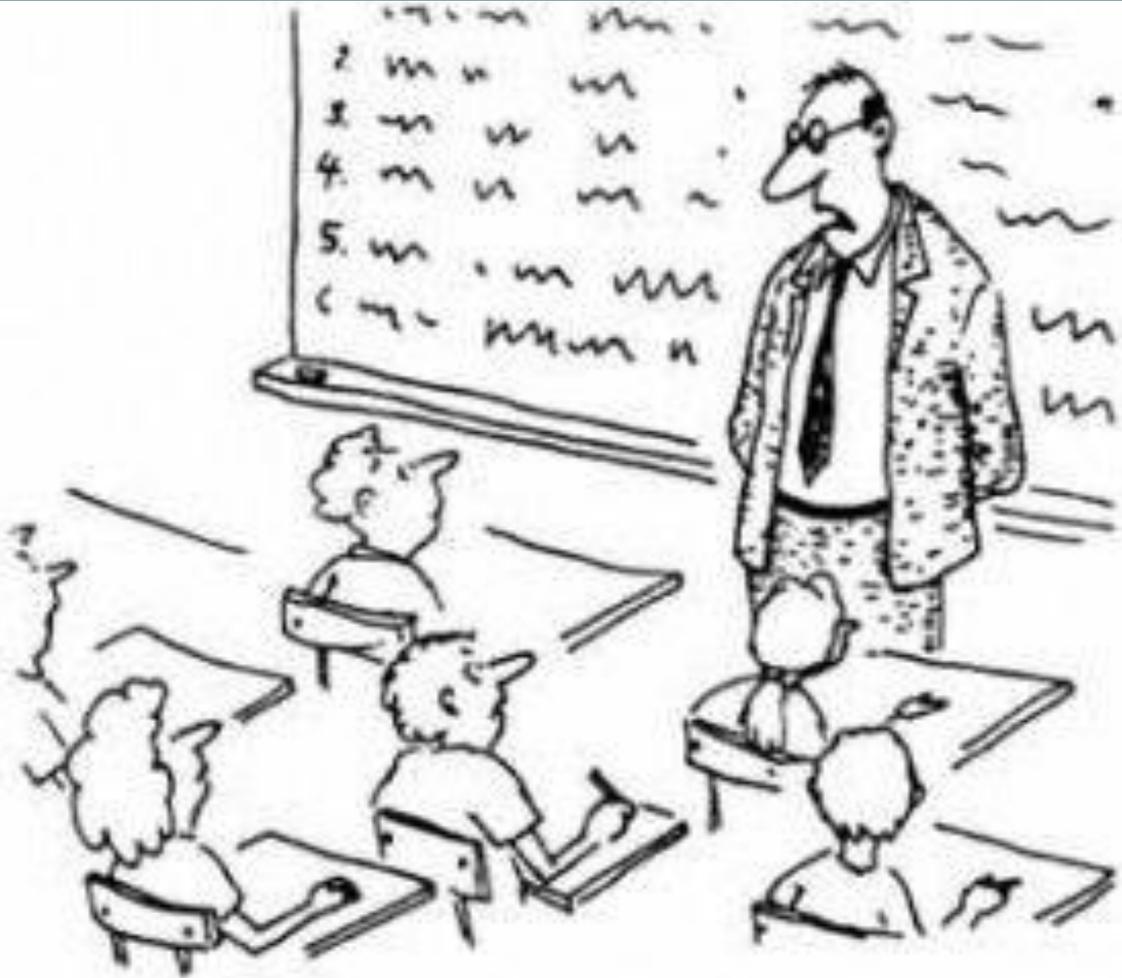


**“Show concern for the learner in the moment, every moment.”**

**Dr. Greg Hanley, Behavioral Observation Podcast, 2025**



[ftfbc.com](http://ftfbc.com)



*“I expect you all to be independent, innovative, critical thinkers who will do exactly as I say!”*

**compliance,  
compliance,  
compliance**

Meaningful Outcomes Rely on a  
Shift in Assumptions and Practices

# Big Ideas

Freedom from severe problem behavior is achievable for all individuals with autism (and beyond) and their families.

This can be achieved without the use of off-label medications, without out of district placements, extended inpatient hospital stays, and without isolation, humiliation, or escalation.

It begins by first understanding why the child is exhibiting the problem behavior and teaching skills to help individuals navigate the world around them.

Credits: Dr. Greg Hanley Ph.D., BCBA-D, LABA

# From Compliance to Compassion

- Increase joy among your students throughout the day.
- Prevent escalation to severe problem behavior by responding to behavioral indicators of distress.
- If necessary, remove challenges that commonly evoke problem behavior
- Reconnect with students. Teach them that staff are not adversarial but rather, are there for them
- Prioritize student and staff safety.



# Hesitation to Hope

Hesitations



Hopes

- This is not how we were trained.
  - Will this make behavior worse?
  - Will teams be open to the shift?
  - Is our skill set good enough to work with some of the most difficult students?
- It aligned our practices to our values
  - Socially valid and meaningful outcomes
  - More time dedicated to teaching skill and not reacting to behavior
  - Helping to bring joy back to schools



# Compassionate Care

- Learn by listening.
- Learn by creating joy.
- Learn by empowering.
- Learn while teaching skills.

## **A Perspective on Today's ABA from Dr. Hanley**

ghanley19 / September 9, 2021

Originally posted on June 4, 2020.

**This is today's ABA when starting therapy with an autistic person, especially one who routinely engages in problem behavior.**

Today's ABA (applied behavior analysis) is about continually learning about the predilections of the autistic person being served so that preferred learning contexts can be developed en route to developing skills that can be appreciated by the autistic person as well as others. What follows is a guide for those implementing today's ABA but written for those who are curious about what today's ABA involves.

### **Learn by listening.**

Ask the autistic person and/or ask people who know and love the autistic person about what he/she/they loves and hates. Be sure to review the love, aversion, and indifference towards activities, objects, furniture, contexts, and especially social interactions. Ask that person about the autistic person's voice. How do they routinely communicate? And, especially, what are they communicating with their problem behavior? In other words, today's ABA starts with asking questions, listening, and learning about the autistic person by people who know and love the autistic person.

(Hanley, 2021)



**Learn By  
Listening**

# Today's ABA- Learn by Listening

Seek to understand the student by asking thoughtful questions and listening carefully to those who know them best

# Ask and Observe

- What items, activities, people, and social interactions does the student like and dislike?
- How do they regularly communicate?
- Assume competence and lead with curiosity
  - Replace “Why are they doing this?” with “What are they communicating?”

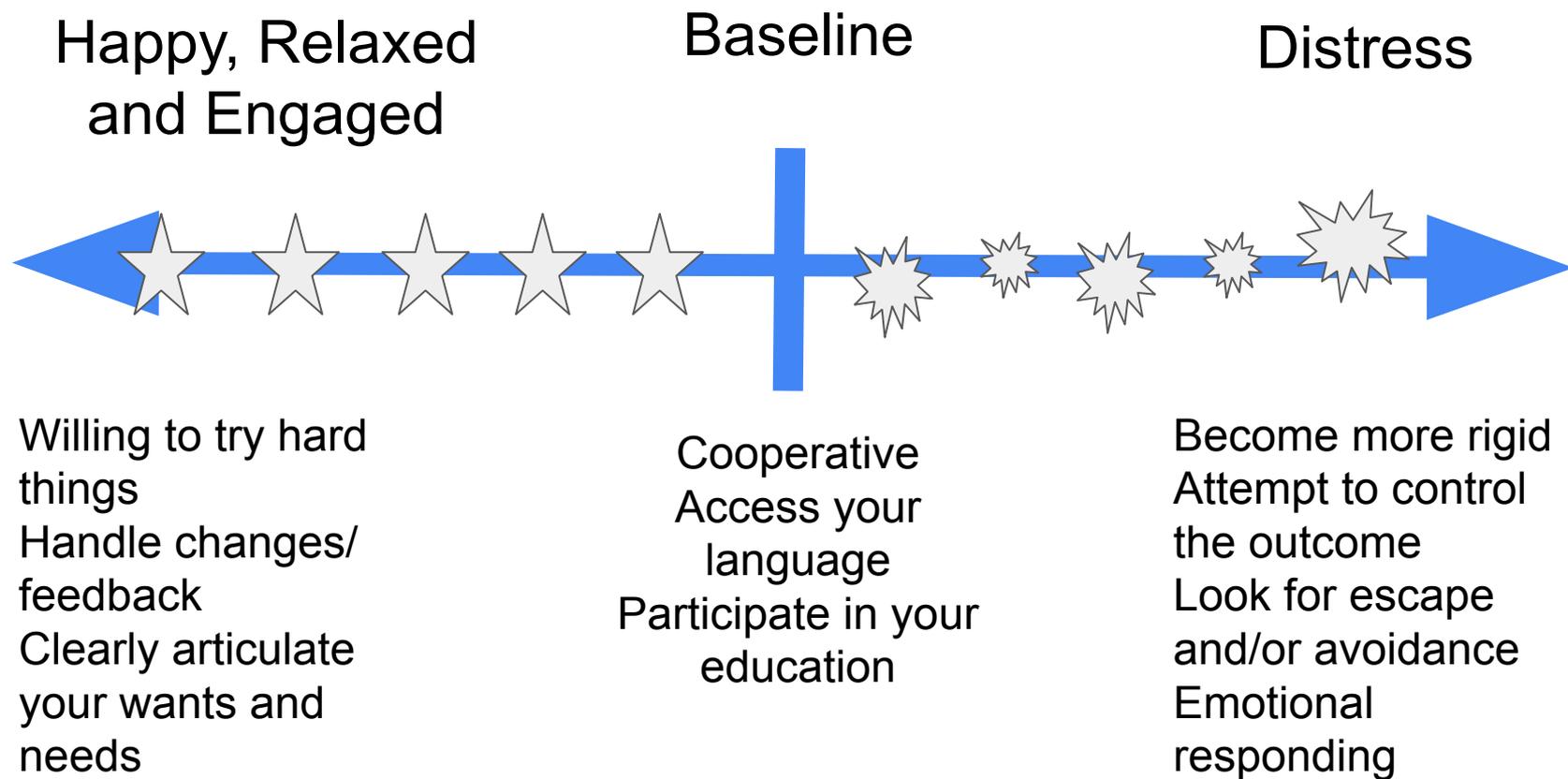


**Learn By  
Creating  
Joy**

# Today's ABA- Learn by Creating Joy

Teach the student that you know them, you see them, you hear them, and you are there for them.

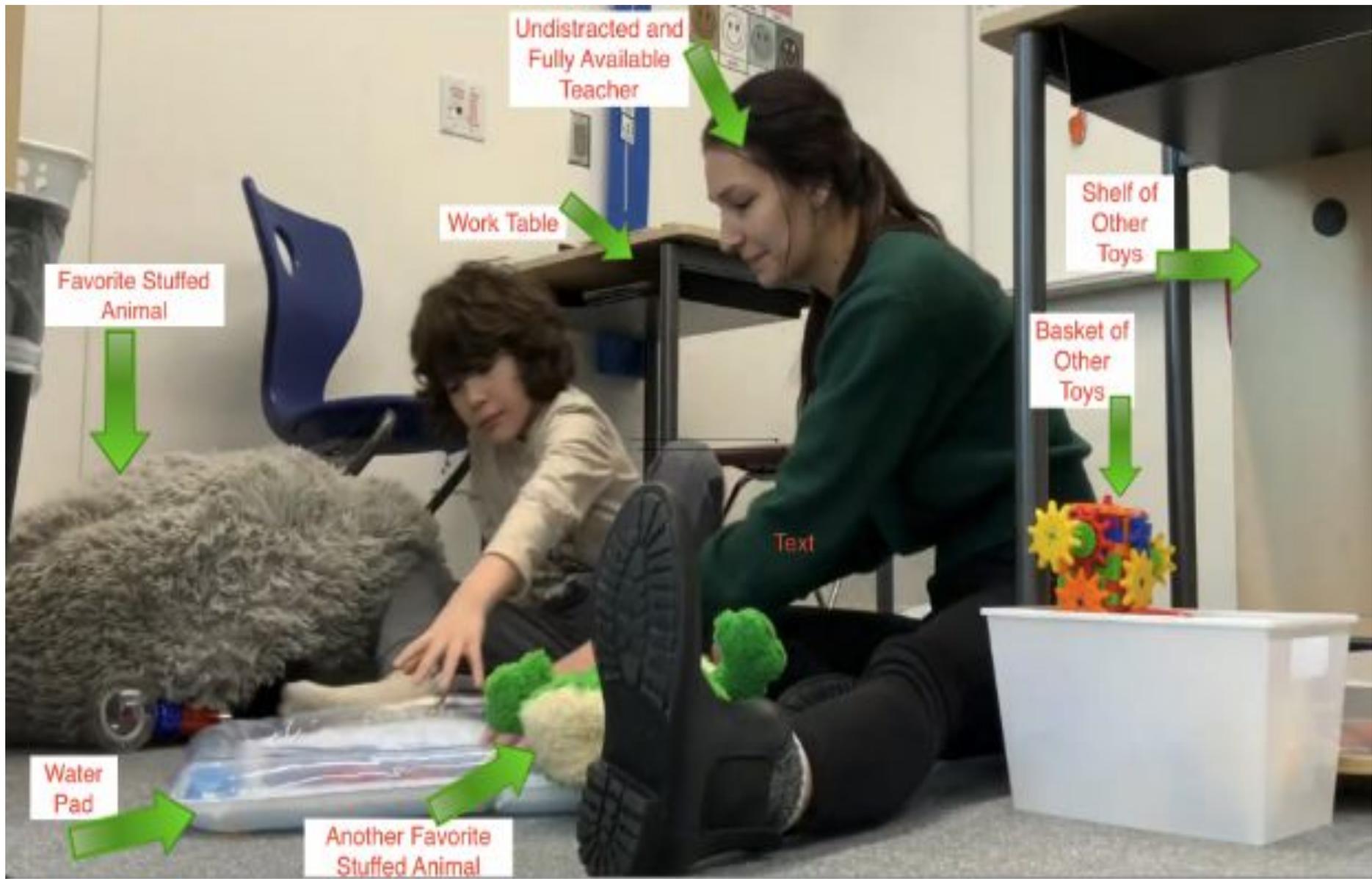
# Continuum of Regulation



# Creating a Context of Joy



1. Start with the give. If one is good, multiple are better!
2. Personalize and synthesize reinforcers.
3. Shared experience rather than a supervised one.



Kayla, Special Education Teacher

# HRE

- Happy
- Relaxed
- Engaged



Give the escape

Give the access

Give the attention

Give the things that are important to the student....

Give all of the things students are asking for with problem behavior, before they have to.

A vintage television set with a wooden-grain cabinet and a black faceplate. The screen is lit up and displays the word "Televisable" in a bold, purple, sans-serif font. To the right of the screen, there are several control knobs and buttons, including a large volume knob and a smaller channel selector knob. The television is set against a purple background.

**Televisable**

**Learn By  
Empowering**

# Today's ABA- Learn by Empowering

Teach the student to trust. Help them see that they don't need to demonstrate problem behavior for you to understand them and honor their communication.

# Problem Behavior

Behavior is communication:  
I want this, I want out of this, I need help... etc.

Emotional Responding:  
severe problem behavior controlled  
by the “lizard brain”



Groan

Head on desk

Whining

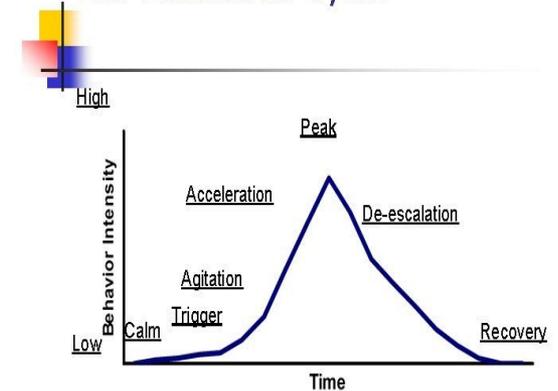
Eye roll

Saying “no!”

Screaming

Low level physical aggression: pushing, smacking, etc.

## The Escalation Cycle



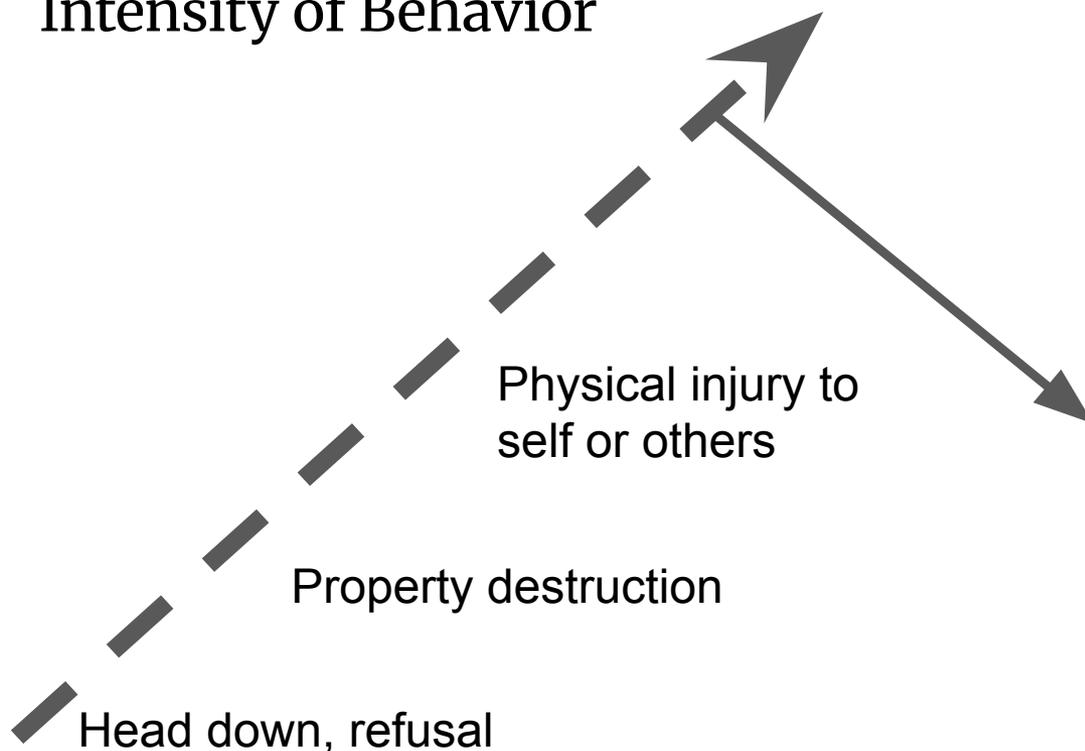
Colvin & Sugai, 1989

# Strong Control of Problem Behavior Through Extinction

## Initial Effect: Extinction Burst

- If the behavior has not contacted reinforcement (unlikely)
- Student is exhausted
- Student has exhausted all the skills in their repertoire

## Intensity of Behavior

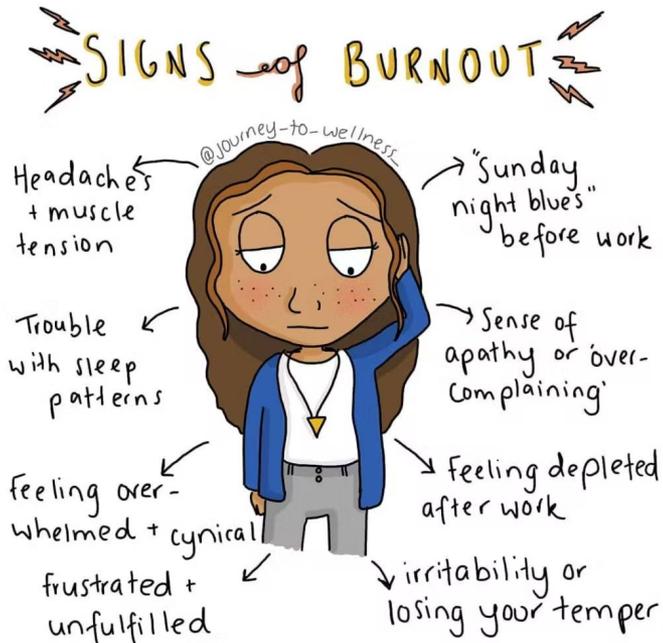


# The Effect

Long Term:

Gradual Reduction of  
Levels of Problem Behavior

If...



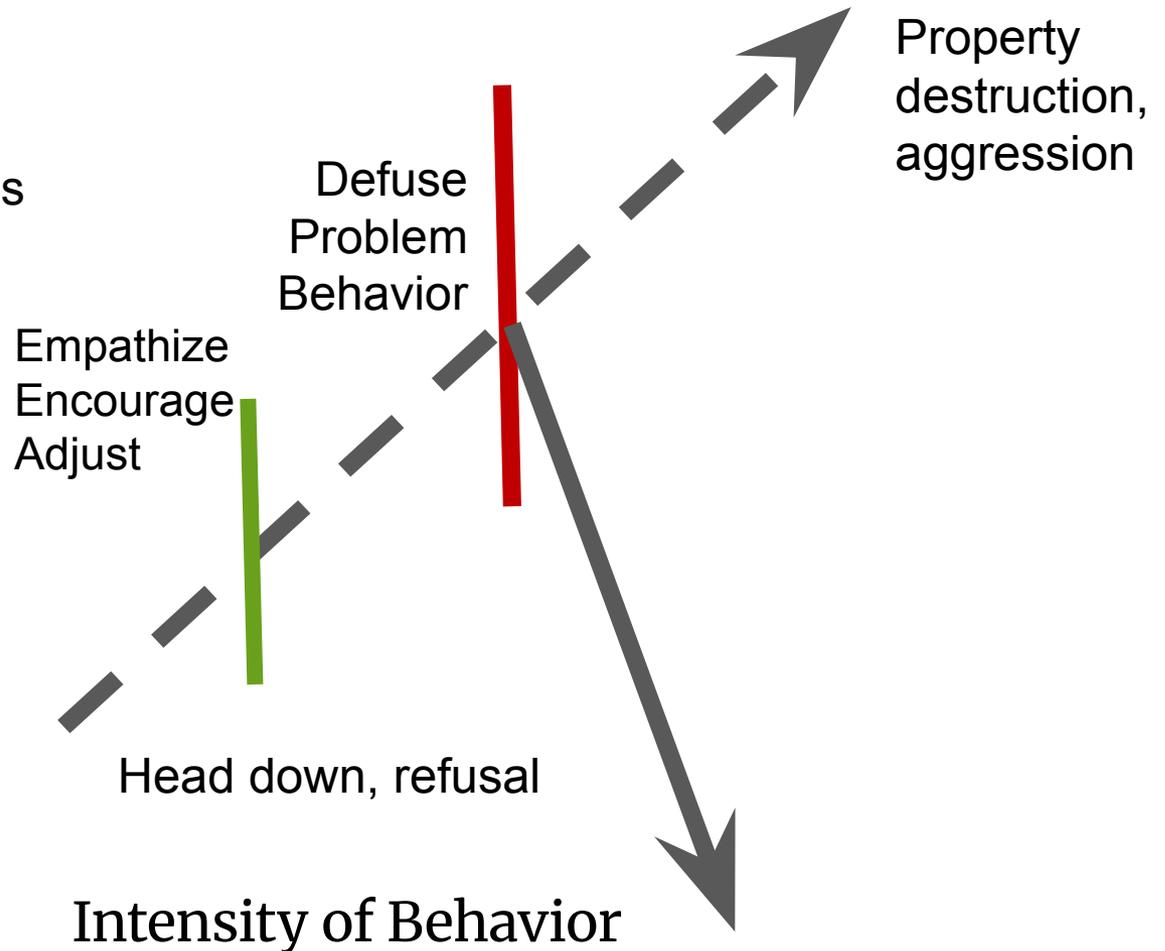
Unintended Consequences

- Restraint
- Seclusion
- Staff injury
- Student injury
- Classroom clear outs
- Damaged relationships
- Loss of student dignity

# Strong Control of Problem Behavior Through Reinforcement

## Reinforcement has two effects:

1. Immediate Effect: Stops behavior
  - “I see you, I hear you.”
  - Strengthens relationship



# Strategies to Defuse Problem Behavior



# The Effect

## Long Term:

- Behavior shapes down from severe to mild
- Increased cooperation with adult led activities
- World's expand across school and community environments

## Intended Consequences:

- Staff feel safer
- Better relationships
- Dignity for students
- Safer environment for other students in the class
- More opportunities to learn



**Learn By  
Teaching Skills**

# Today's ABA- Learn While Teaching

Teach skills that help students get what they want and need in safe and appropriate ways, instead of relying on problem behavior.

*“But kids can’t do whatever they want, whenever they want! They’ve got to learn to put the ipads away, do the assignment and be ok in the classroom....”*

Every teacher, Everywhere.... March, 2026

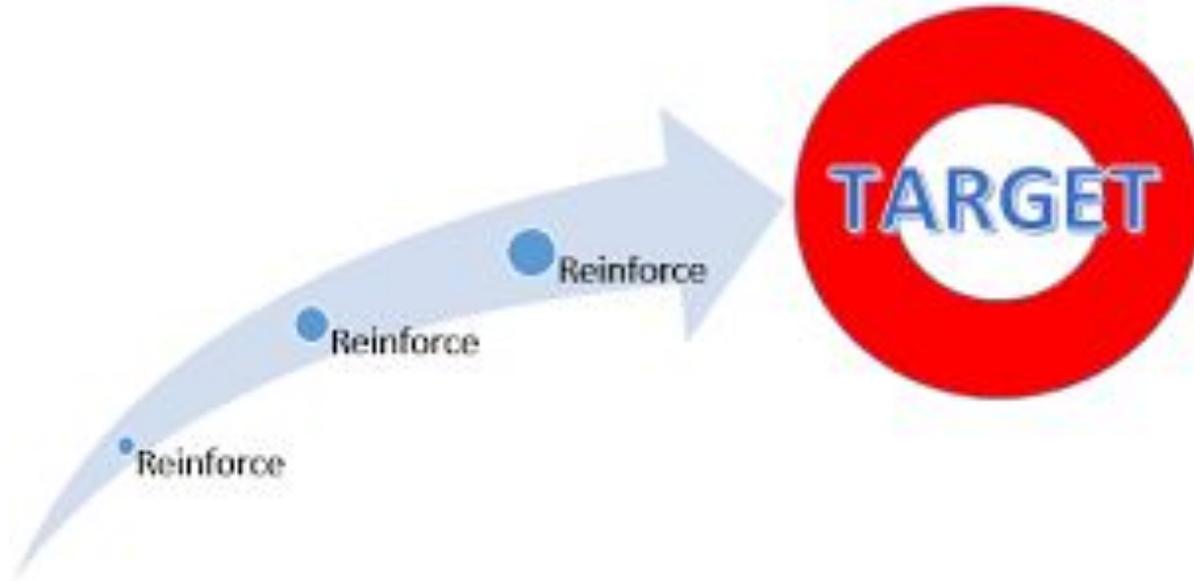
# Teaching Behavior Skill Repertoires

- Contrive or specifically set up opportunities to teach and practice the new skill
- Focus on critical behavior skills that will generalize to many contexts. (ex. communication, toleration, cooperation, etc.)
- Start with the give... consider synthesized reinforcers
- Teaching only occurs when a student is regulated and available for learning (HRE)
- Direct instruction: Modeling, Practice, Feedback (Repeat)
- Demonstrate mastery of a skill with one person, in one setting before looking to generalize.

# Critical Teaching Tool

## Shaping

A process used in teaching in which a skill is gradually taught by differentially reinforcing successive approximations to the behavior that the teacher wants to create.



# Critical Teaching Tool

## In the Moment Decision Making

- Being responsive to our learner's behavior/ performance in the moment.
- Making adjustments to our teaching in the moment.
- Allowing the student to teach us what we don't have right.



# Critical Teaching Tool

## Unpredictable, Intermittent Reinforcement

A schedule of reinforcement where a response is reinforced after an unpredictable number of responses.

It mimics a more natural schedule of reinforcement and therefore encourages strong and steady responding.

Should be used with new AND mastered skills



# Final Thoughts



# A Comparison of Approaches

## A Comparison of Behavioral Approaches

<p>Reinforcement</p>	<p>One reinforcer at a time</p> <p>Reinforcers hidden and out of sight</p> <p>Controlled engagement of reinforcers</p> <p>Supervised experiences with reinforcement</p>	<p>Synthesized reinforcement—more is better</p> <p>Enriched environments</p> <p>Follow the student's lead</p> <p>Shared experiences</p>
<p>Response to Problem Behavior</p>	<p>Compliance with classroom expectations</p> <p>Threats, punishment and reminders of consequences used to increase motivation</p> <p>Task demands do not go away or change after problem behavior</p>	<p>Shaping of skills to meet terminal expectations based on student's skillset</p> <p>Rapport, invitation and presentation of task increase motivation</p> <p>Student's behavior is monitored and task demands are adjusted in order to avoid problem behavior</p>
<p>Teaching Skills</p>	<p>Identify specific missing skills, teach a replacement behavior</p> <p>Practice or debrief after critical incidents or mistakes</p> <p>Teaching during escalation</p>	<p>Intentional teaching of critical behavioral skills (communication, toleration, relinquishing, and transitioning)</p> <p>Repeated practice and feedback in a contrived setting with safety and generalization in mind</p>



---

Safety

---

Rapport

---

Peaceful Progress

---

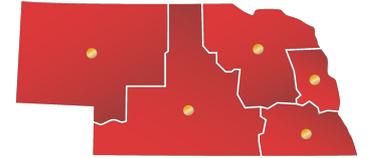
Televisibility/Dignity

---

# Resources for further information

Find and Contact your Regional  
ASD Network team members on  
the  
[ASD Network Website](#)

- [FTF trainings](#)
- [A Perspective Today's ABA](#)
- [Practical Functional Assessment website](#)
- [Universal Protocol Overview](#)
- [PFA/SBT Overview](#)
- [Balance Overview](#)



N E B R A S K A  
autism spectrum disorders  
N E T W O R K



Thank You

# Specific References

Brown, B. (2013). *Brené Brown on empathy* [Video]. RSA. <https://www.thersa.org/video/>

Brown, B. (2013). *Brené Brown on empathy* [Video]. RSA. <https://www.thersa.org/video/>...Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 3.0.

Ghaemmaghami, M., Ruppel, K., Cammilleri, A. P., Fiani, T., & Hanley, G. P. (2022). *Toward compassion in the assessment and treatment of severe problem behavior*. *Behavior Analysis in Practice*, 15(3), 765–775. doi: [10.1007/s40617-024-01012-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40617-024-01012-1)

Greg Hanley, G. P. (2021, September 9). *A perspective on today's ABA by Dr. Greg Hanley*. Practical Functional Assessment.

<https://practicalfunctionalassessment.com/2021/09/09/a-perspective-on-todays-aba-by-dr-greg-hanley/>

Taylor, B. A., LeBlanc, L. A., & Nosik, M. R. (2019). *Soft skills: The case for compassionate approaches, or how behavior analysis keeps finding its heart*. *Behavior Analysis in Practice*, 12(3), 654–666. doi: [10.1007/s40617-021-00563-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40617-021-00563-x)

# Additional References

Hanley, G. P. (2012). *Functional assessment of problem behavior: Dispelling myths, overcoming implementation obstacles, and developing new lore*. *Behavior Analysis in Practice*, 5(1), 54–72. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03391818>

Hanley, G. P., Jin, C. S., Vanselow, N. R., & Hanratty, L. A. (2014). *Producing meaningful improvements in problem behavior of children with autism via synthesized analyses and function-based treatments*. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 47(1), 16–36. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaba.106>

Hanley, G. P., Ghaemmaghami, M., & others (2019). *Assent-based treatment and practical functional assessment: Addressing problem behavior with safety, dignity, and effectiveness*. (Conference workshops and clinical training materials frequently cited in compassionate ABA literature.)

Rajaraman, A., Austin, J. L., Gover, H. C., & Hanley, G. P. (2022). *Toward compassion in the assessment and treatment of severe problem behavior*. *Behavior Analysis in Practice*, 15(3), 765–775. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40617-021-00634-7>