

Below is a letter that was written and sent to Marlies Hübner on Nov. 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016. She recently wrote an article for TAZ.de, which was published on December 02<sup>nd</sup>, 2016 (<http://www.taz.de/!5358260/>) comparing ABA to a cult and calling into question the ethics of our profession. She is the partner of Misha Anouk, another Anti-ABA activist who actually happens to be the so called "Cult expert" she quoted in her article. It is unfortunate that her article sourced him without mentioning their close relationship. This letter was sent in response to 6 questions she asked us PRIOR to her writing the TAZ.de article and she chose not to include any of these answers in her article instead continuing to spread falsehoods about ABA.

After the article was published in TAZ.de, we emailed Frau Hübner and asked her if she would be willing to meet to discuss what we saw as her misunderstandings and clear up the false ideas she is spreading.

*„Guten Tag Frau Hübner,  
leider ist der heute erschienene Artikel über ABA genau das, was ich anhand Ihres Blogs-Eintrags befürchtet hatte. Wenn Ihnen Menschen mit Autismus tatsächlich am Herzen liegen, sollten Sie ein ehrliches Interesse daran haben sich über moderne ABA-Vorgehensweisen zu informieren und diese detailliert erklärt zu bekommen. Ich kann Ihnen dies per E-Mail anbieten, durch ein persönliches Gespräch oder auch bei einer Hospitation.“*

She declined to meet with us in any form and rather chose to continue spreading what she now knows to be outright lies about ABA based on the answers we gave her. She has since done a radio interview sharing the same incorrect information. At this point, I don't know how ABA professionals are going to be able to stop people from spreading these rumors and incorrect assertions as the ones involved don't seem to have any understanding of current ABA methods, any connection to actual German ABA providers or any interest in learning the truth.

Hespe, 20.11.2016

Dear Frau Hübner,

I would like to thank you for contacting me for information regarding your upcoming article for TAZ.de. I noticed that your 6 questions were not the typical questions someone might ask if they were truly trying to find out about a therapy/education model like ABA. This prompted me to look you up and I found that you are not an unbiased reporter looking for information as you represented yourself to be. Instead, you are someone who has authored at least one blog post that is strongly critical of ABA. I read your blog and found it to be completely misguided in its understanding and explanation of what ABA actually is. With so little of the information on your current blog post being correct and none of what is correct given any context, I find it hard to believe that you would be able to write an objective and fair article for TAZ.de.

Having said that, I will answer the 6 questions you have asked, but I will need to also include information about ABA that you seem to be misunderstanding, or ignoring in your current blog post (<http://www.robotinbox.de/aba-und-kritik/>). I know this might not break down to the small simple quotes you were hoping to use for your article, so I'm going to share this letter with the editors of Taz.de and ask that they consider printing it or perhaps allowing me to write something in contrast to your piece which I assume will be negative and misleading, based on your past writing.

## **Q1: What is your main goal for the Child with Autism with ABA?**

Knospe-ABA has a philosophy that is stated in our program handouts: Children with autism can and do learn from their environment and through the science of ABA and Verbal Behavior we can learn to change the environment in ways that help them to be more successful in life. This philosophy points out 4 major aspects behind our approach:

1. Like all people, the behavior used by children with autism does not occur in a vacuum. It is learned and influenced by the way the environment responds to it. This is true about all of us as it is true about children on all points of the autism spectrum. For example, if a child currently does not have the language they need to ask for the things they want, it is possible that they will try several physical behaviors to gain access to something. They might point to it, or grab mom by the hand and take her to the item. Mom will then either choose to give the child the item, or not, based on her parenting decision. "Sure you can have this toy," or "No, you cannot have sweets before dinner" etc. When a non-verbal child is told "no", he or she might accept this "no" and find something else to do or they might try to find other ways to get that item. They could cry, they could try grabbing it when mom is not looking, they could try hitting mom, they could end up angrily throwing a tantrum, damage items in the house or hurt themselves or others. What the general public doesn't realize is that in the moment the parent said, "no" to the child about having the sweets, they were actually using what the science of ABA calls "Extinction" (A behavior that has been reinforced in the past is not being reinforced). When the behavior of pointing at something or taking mom's hand to an item is put on extinction in the home, ABA professionals know that an extinction burst will follow. This means that the child will try stronger versions of their known behavior to gain the item. This is how humans all act in situations of extinction. When this happens, it is very important that the parent knows what to do in this situation. Without an ABA professional involved what will likely happen is the child might cry and the parent will still say "no". Then the child might throw themselves on the floor and still, "no". Then the child might hit mom but still, "no"... Finally, the child might hit himself in the head, bite his hand or knock a glass off the table breaking it on the floor. At this point mom, who is now concerned about the child's safety, might decide that it is easier to give the child the sweet to get him to calm down so she can clean the glass and get back to preparing dinner for the family. This sort of thing happens all the time in houses for kids of different ages both with and without a diagnosis of autism. However, most kids grow and develop skills that allow them to better communicate their needs and wants. Others learn enough social desire and understanding that they are able to start accepting, "no" without continued tantrums. This is not always the case. Children who do not continue to develop and gain age appropriate communication and social desire are often the ones who become diagnosed with autism. When these kids knock the glass off the table or hit themselves or others and then get the thing that they previously wanted they become more likely to use this same behavior again in the future. Why is this? Because, this is the behavior that proves most successful in getting their wants and needs met. By the time I am called in to help, the child has already developed a large repertoire of inappropriate behavior based on the fact that the parents (or a teacher) has unknowingly been trying to use extinction. But, they don't know what extinction is and how it works. Because of this they are seldom prepared for the extinction burst that follows. When unprepared for the extinction burst and having no plan to keep themselves and the child

safe during extinction, the parents will often “give in” at the worst possible time. To get through the day they might end up accidentally extinguishing (reducing) appropriate behavior like pointing or bringing mom’s hand to something they want. Then they might end up reinforcing (increasing) the negative behavior that follows like tantruming, self-abuse or in this case, knocking the glass onto the floor. What you will find if you go into the homes of the families who seek ABA out for help is that their children have developed a repertoire of dangerous behavior and the family, teachers, their local Autism-Therapy-Center, Speech and Ergo therapists, don’t know how to help them with a child who is now tantruming constantly or breaking glasses and dishes whenever he is told, “No.”

2. The second important part of our philosophy says that “We can Learn.” The reason it says “we can learn” is that we are not trying to ever force a child to succumb to a specific type of teaching or follow a strict guideline approach. Instead, we use our training in ABA to learn what teaching works best in helping that child make progress. There is no perfect example of teaching that works for everyone and there is no perfect example of what an ABA program looks like. ABA is about attempting different possibilities in helping a child learn important skills that will benefit them in their life. Once these different approaches are identified, we use them and take objective data to make sure that what we are doing is really working. For example: If you are trying to teach a child to start saying his first two-syllable words. Do you know the best way to prompt him? Do you give him the whole word to say as an echo prompt? Do you give him the first part to echo and then the second part? Do you get him to practice the second part first and then go to the full word such as in, “ter”, “ter”,... “water”? The truth is I don’t know the best way. For some kids one way might work better and for others another might. Is it best to use a visual prompt like a picture of a glass of water? Should I try to teach this under the motivation of when the child wants water or should I teach it as a label first? Parents and teachers are constantly having to help early verbal learners say more complex words. ABA is the process of knowing about all of these different methods of prompting that have been tried successfully and have been represented in scientific research journals throughout the past 50 years. Then, we assess the options with the child and choose the best plan for that specific child. Once we have a plan, we can then teach mom and dad, the school teacher, the speech therapist and others in the child’s environment to use that plan daily. They will know when the most effective time to teach “water” is for this child and how to best prompt it. We can also ask them to keep track of progress to make sure that our plan is working and progress is being made. If it is, we continue teaching and move on from “water” to the next most important words for that child as identified by the school or parents. If it is not working, we analyze again and try to figure out if a different motivation or prompting method would be more successful. This is repeated until we find the method that works best.
3. The philosophy also states that we “Change the environment” -- not the child. There is nothing in our approach or philosophy that suggests that we are trying to force a child to be something different than he is. We are not trying to cure autism. We are not trying to necessarily even address the label of Autism. What we are doing is assessing the ways in which the child’s school, home and community is currently supporting the inappropriate behavior that is causing distress. We are also looking at the ways the environment is not successful in increasing the important learning skills the child will need. We then go about the process of educating the adults in the environment on how to best address those abilities and needs. Our ABA programs are focused in

Verbal Behavior (VB). This means that we prioritize the motivation and interests of the child. We do not try to manipulate or force the child to participate in the teaching setting. We instead focus on changing the environment so that it is as supportive as possible to the child's learning and makes learning more valuable and fun for the child. **Our ABA/VB program focuses heavily on the principle of "Pairing."** This means we have to teach the adults how to engage with the child in ways the child wants to be engaged with. It teaches them how to better play with the child without taking the fun out of that play. It teaches them to pair themselves with their child's favorite things and make those things even better because the parents are a part of it. This is a form of social relationship development and it is clearly stated in every program we offer that at least 75% of all teacher, parent, therapist interactions be saved for the process of pairing with the child. This only allows a maximum of 25% of the interaction to be used for teaching requests. When our programs are up and working like they should, our kids would rather be learning with mom and dad or their therapists than anywhere else they could be. We make this happen because we teach the adults how to be more fun than the child could have alone. We also are sure never to push learning demands beyond the development of the relationship that they have with their child.

## **Q2: What is a therapy success for you?**

4. The fourth aspect of our philosophy is that we are doing all of this to "help the child be more successful in life." I think that by explaining this, I will also answer your second question. ABA is defined as applying behavioral research and principles to help with issues or problems that are socially significant. This means that we have the same goals as any other form of psychology. When we meet a new child we have only one goal. Finding out what problems that child and family are dealing with and helping them find ways to overcome those difficulties. Most often, when a family comes to us their child will have some combination of inappropriate or even dangerous behavior problems and other learning deficits. To be a success, we have to be able to help that family find the right way to arrange their environment so that it is no longer reinforcing (increasing) the negative or dangerous behavior. If a child is hitting himself in the face until he bleeds whenever he is asked to follow a house rule like "no running around naked" or "no kicking the cat", or "no wiping your poo on the walls in your bedroom," (among the many other examples we deal with regularly), we are being successful if we can find a way to motivate the child to choose alternative behavior or communication skills. We are successful when they gain the ability to "wait" or to accept "no" without hitting themselves or using other dangerous behavior. Maybe that means seeing if we can start by getting him to hit a pillow instead of his face while frustrated and also teaching him basic sign language so that he can start to communicate his desires more effectively. Maybe we can put him in a situation, where he can learn to wait for increasingly longer periods of time for things he wants (from 1 second, to 5 seconds, to 10 seconds, to half a minute, to a minute etc.). Maybe we can show him, through Pairing and Reinforcement, that participating in the family rules offers him a better opportunity for play and relationship development than tantruming does. And maybe we can teach the family how to be successful, when they try to use extinction rather than using it without training. As I mentioned earlier, this can cause even more disruptive behavior to develop. In other examples, if we can teach a child to stop and look when he hears his mom call his name so that she no longer feels she has to hold his hands constantly (or in severe cases to put a leash around him), when they

walk in public for fear that he will run into the street, I consider that a success. When we can help a 16-year old boy who has been going to special schools and getting services from the local Autism-Therapy-Center for many years to say his first word in only two days of play based intervention, I consider that a success. These would be my definitions of success along with any and all additional behavior problems we can help a family solve and skills we can teach a child to better their lives.

**Q3: How are parents being trained and getting supervision.**

Anyone who spends any time really looking at modern ABA and particularly the ABA/VB method that is currently the most dominant in Germany, would see a bunch of parents who are spending as much free time as they can playing with their kids. They are dancing together, jumping on the trampoline together, playing with bubbles, tickling, reading stories, looking at pictures, playing chase, all while being able to assist the child in moving forward in the development of important learning goals they need to be more successful in their daily lives. They would also see parents who are not panicked and mistakenly “giving in” to their children’s behavior at the wrong times accidentally increasing inappropriate and sometimes dangerous behavior. In many cases, you would see these kids go to school and have a teacher, a school aid, a speech therapist, and an ergo therapist, who have all been taught by ABA consultants the best teaching methods for this specific child. What they would see is kids who are generally much happier in their day-to-day lives and are growing and developing meaningful skills that will support them as they need to become more independent. They will see kids learning how to continue living with their parents instead of needing a hospital institution, or able to live in a group home instead of with their parents, or able to work and live independently instead of in a group home. Because of this, what they would see is the first autism intervention available in Germany that can be successful in reducing inappropriate behavior and increasing learning rates while also lowering yearly costs over time. As an added benefit, they will see that kids who receive good early ABA intervention end up costing the government far fewer euros over the span of their lifetime than those who don’t.

**Q4: Is ABA a method of therapy or learning?**

As you can see these are not simple and easy answers I have given you. **They are quite complex and you need a lot of information to be able to understand how and why we work the way that we do.** This is also a difficult question that I think can only be answered by the person who is using it. My question to you would be, do you consider Autism to be a disease that needs to be treated or just a label for children with deficits in language, social skills and may use some repetitive self-stimulating behavior that need to be educated like everyone else? ABA is a great way to identify the best learning approaches for individuals. Individuals with autism deserve a good education as well. I was a teacher before becoming a special education teacher and I was a special education teacher before becoming a behavior analyst. I personally use my understanding of ABA to be the best teacher I can be to the children and their families. So, my personal answer would be that ABA is a method of learning and Förderung. Others might have a differing opinion based on how they see the label of Autism.

**Q5: What do you think about stimulus-reaction schema?**

Although German is a second language for me, I think what you are asking me is what do I think about the fact that our behavior is related to the environmental conditions or stimuli around it. I would say it is very related. For instance, a behavior analyst knows that for anyone to demonstrate any skill there has to be three things available in the environment before the behavior. There has to be some sort of stimulus that acts like a signal that reinforcement might be available if a behavior occurs. Example: Food is sitting on the table in front of you. (This signals that hunger can be alleviated if you were to use the behavior chain of reaching, grabbing, biting, chewing and swallowing). There has to be some sort of motivator in the moment that makes the value of that reinforcement more important than other possible reinforcers in the moment. Example: You haven't eaten since the night before and your feeling stomach pains and these pains are starting to overcome the desire you have to finish reading your book. If you have both the signal that food is available and as soon as the motivation of hunger overcomes your desire to read the book, you will likely reach and start the eating behavior chain. If you find the process difficult to do for some reason, you might also need a prompt (something that helps you know what behavior will meet with the reinforcement). Example: Someone who can show you how to hold chopsticks so that you can reach, grab, bite and chew the food in front of you. Any behavior we use in our lives can be identified as having some signal in the environment, that makes reinforcement available and some motivation that makes that reinforcement valuable in the moment. That is why and when we behave. It is also true that what happens after our behavior affects our use of that behavior in the future. For example: If you are late for work and drive above the speed limit and it saves you time and keeps you from getting in trouble you will be more likely to speed in the future when you need to. However, if when you speed you get a ticket that costs you money and makes you even later and puts points on your driving record, you might not choose to speed next time. You may choose other behavior like getting up earlier or showering the night before, so that you don't need to speed. So, yes, I absolutely believe in the antecedent - behavior- Consequence contingency that tends to guide all human behavior during the day. (If I understood your question correctly.)

What I find the ABA critics in Germany don't ever seem to want to do is actually learn about modern ABA. I know this because we have been offering information through presentations and Informations-Veranstaltungen for years. I have a book available that offers 400 pages on how we implement ABA principles in our work with children here in Germany. Nobody who is currently arguing against ABA online has ever asked to observe any of our ongoing programs or came out when we invited them, talk to any of our parents or even our former clients. We have been doing this in Germany for over 12 years now and have worked with close to 1000 different children in that timeframe. Many of our clients who have grown up can talk about their experiences now if asked. Most of their parents can answer any questions you have related to ethics and our goals in programming. And although you may have met people who have had bad experiences with some forms of ABA in the distant past, I don't know of anyone who has actually worked with us or any of the current certified German ABA providers, that are making any of these claims regarding any lack of professionalism or less than exemplary effort in support of their child's needs. With what is likely to be near a thousand people who have experienced modern ABA in Germany in the past 12 years, how many unhappy customers would their have to be if ABA was truly bad, unethical, or in any way inappropriate? I would imagine at least 10% to 30%, if not more would be speaking out. It would be quite clear that this was not an appropriate or effective approach. You wouldn't have to get quotes from people who have never experienced modern ABA or ABA/VB in Germany. You would be able to find people with actual experience with one of our current providers, who can back up these claims. Now, I

am sure there have likely been an unhappy family or two for any number of normal reasons over the past 12 years as there would be with just as with any form of therapy or doctor or school.

But, if ABA is as you suggest in your blog unethical and dehumanizing, then where is the uprising of people who have actually experienced it here with modern ABA professionals? I have not seen a single one let alone the many you would expect, if there was any merit to these claims. Instead, the people who are banging the drums suggesting that ABA is bad, have never been a part of a modern ABA program, have outrageously misinformed ideas of what ABA really is, don't seem to want to learn about modern ABA are now trying to get ABA banned without taking into consideration that hundreds of families are currently using it to change the life of their child and family in positive ways. To support their cause, the look up videos and material from the 1970s or of old style ABA or take videos demonstrating a specific situation out of context and try to generalize it, as if it is what all ABA is. If you go to any of their forums, you will see well-meaning people who have real experience with ABA being mobbed when they try to correct misconceptions online. Often a single word they use in their post or a phrase or sentence will be pulled out of context and then restated in the most negative possible light with no connection to reality. Go to any of these anti-ABA groups and look at older threads. Read and see how anyone who comes on and says, "I don't know what you guys are talking about, I am using ABA and it is not at all like you describe it" gets completely attacked with a never ending onslaught of abuse. It is no wonder, nobody who is working hard every day helping their children become more effective communicators and more social members of their family, don't spend any time trying to convince others anymore.

The fact is, every Behavior Analyst I know has gotten into ABA because they were in the fields of Education, Social pedagogy, Ergo Therapy, or Special Education and they found their way into ABA because as they continued their search for a more proactive, comprehensive, effective, and ethical way to address the problems that are often associated with Autism and ABA/VB is where that search has led. There is a reason that ABA has become the most sought after and approved approach to autism intervention in the world. And it is not because people in power don't understand it or because parents who experience it for their kids are all horrible people, who don't know how to treat their child. It is because, good professionals have worked for decades to develop a family friendly and holistic approach to teaching that can be applied to anyone in any setting. This is true because ABA is not a singular programmed way of teaching, but instead a way to assess and identify what approaches in teaching work best for the individual in need.

I guess this last sentence answers your final question.

**Q6: What other diagnoses besides Autism can benefit from ABA.**

ABA is a great way to identify what needs someone has, what skills they have and how to best teach them the skills they are missing to improve their quality of life. I can use this understanding to best help raise my two typical daughters (and I do). I can use it to help a school teacher motivate better learning in a typical classroom (and I have), I can use it to help kids with many disabilities find better success (this is my life's work). The reason ABA is so important for people diagnosed on the Autism Spectrum is because no single way of teaching is right for all kids with autism and early learners with Autism, who are not learning naturally from their environment might be facing a seemingly insurmountable number of challenges. It is only by analyzing the best way to teach each individual child and the ability to identify all

of the strengths and current weaknesses a child has, that one can really support each child in the best possible way. That is what ABA offers and that is why ABA is an important part of the services options for people diagnosed with Autism Spectrum disorders in Germany.

Frau Hübner, I'm always available to answer more questions and I'm also available for a meeting in person. You can contact me at [.....](#) or .....

Kind regards

Robert Schramm, M.A., BCBA