

# **Maximizing ABA-treatment outcomes for children with autism, through an organization-wide adoption of ACT**

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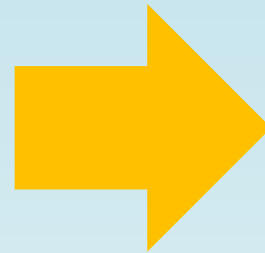
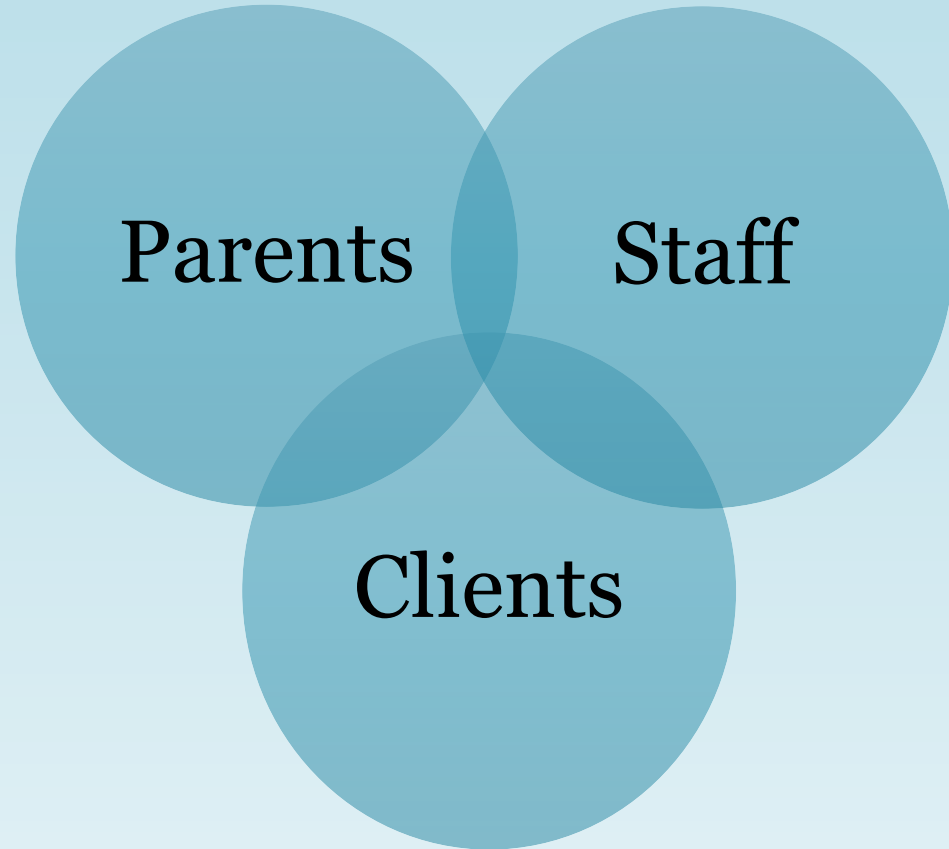
**CENTER FOR AUTISM AND RELATED DISORDERS**

**JUNE 2014**

# Introduction

- Rapid increase in the prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) means an increasing demand for evidence – based treatment
- Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is currently the treatment of choice for ASD
- ABA programs typically do not address the role of private events in determining treatment outcomes

# ABA Treatment Programs



# ABA Treatment Programs

- Practitioners often fail to recognize or simply do not know how to effectively deal with problematic private events (their own or those of the people they interact with)
- Improved treatment outcomes might be achieved if practitioners had access to effective strategies for dealing with problematic covert behavior at work

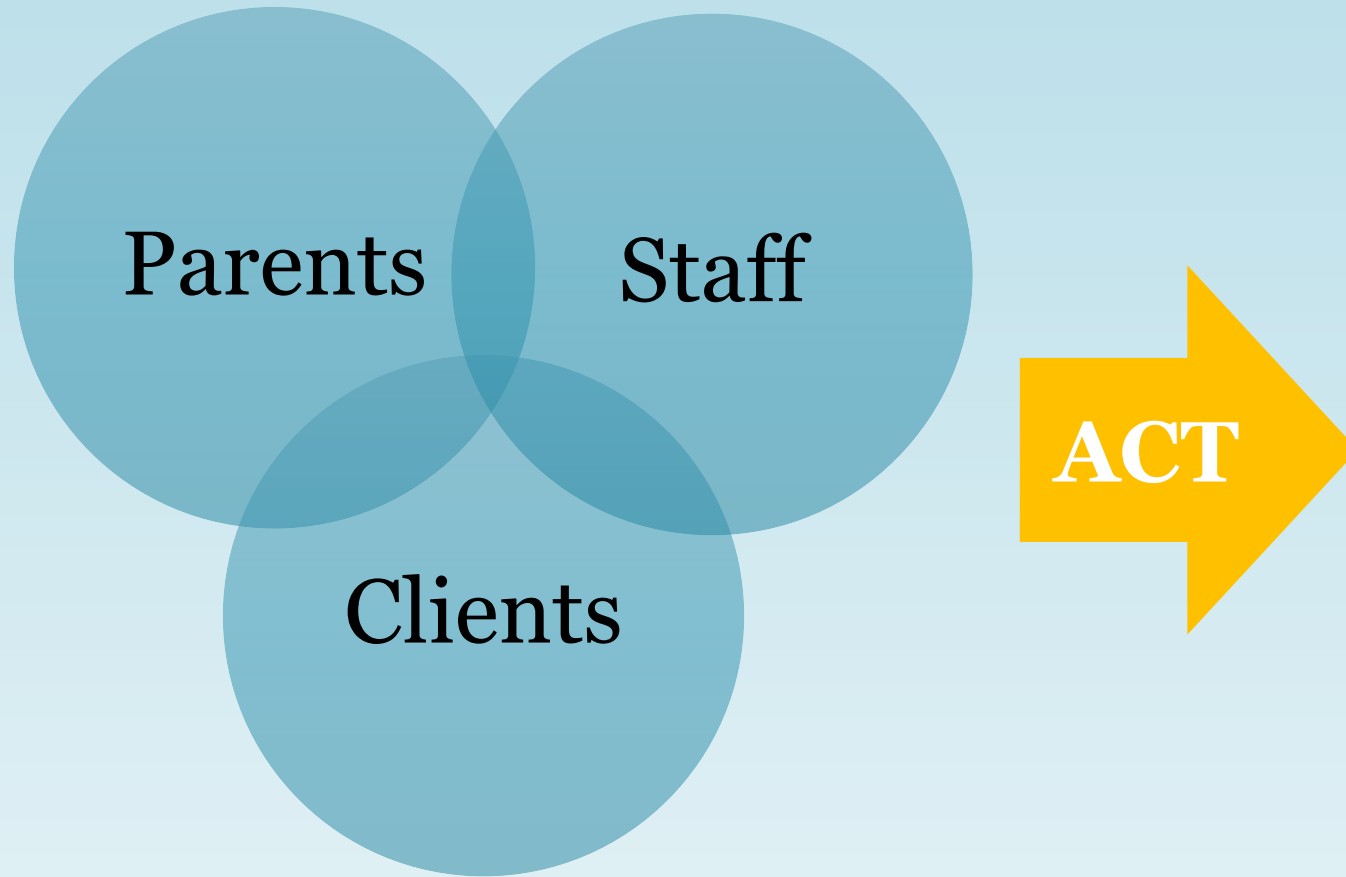


**Creating a  
culture:  
organization-  
wide intervention**

# Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

- Evidence-based approach to understanding and changing problematic patterns of behavior, including unhelpful stress responses and maladaptive coping styles, through a variety of processes, including acceptance and mindfulness
- Builds psychological flexibility (the ability to respond flexibly with respect to difficult thoughts and emotions) in the service of values-driven actions

# ACT and ABA treatment programs



# ACT and ABA treatment services

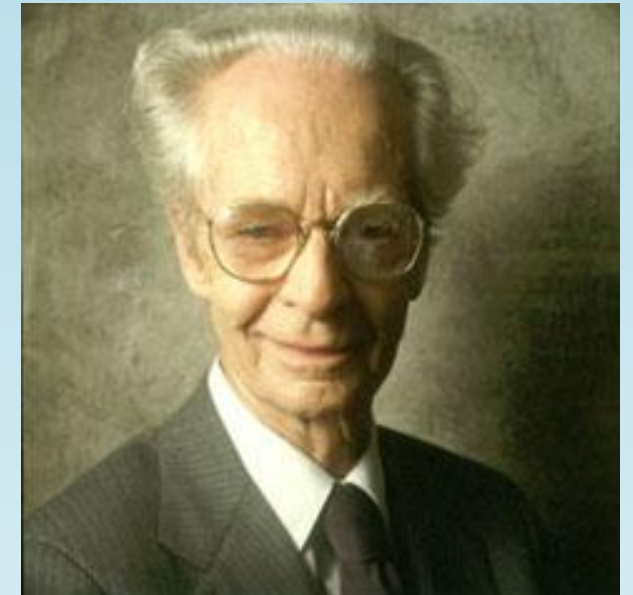
- 1. Staff:** Improve staff well-being and productivity, decrease burn-out and increase retention, and foster stronger, more empathetic parent-practitioner partnerships.
- 2. Parents:** Improve behavioral parent training outcomes, increase parental well-being and resilience.
- 3. Clients:** Improve client outcomes where verbal processes play a role in problematic patterns of behavior.




# ACT and ABA treatment services

Selling points for behavior analysts:

- Behaviorally based intervention (what we do best!)
- Developed within a solid scientific tradition (we love science!)
- Thriving research base (we love research!)
- Globally applicable principles and techniques (everyone can use this stuff!)



# the office

thursdays 8:30/7:30c  NBC



## ACT for Staff

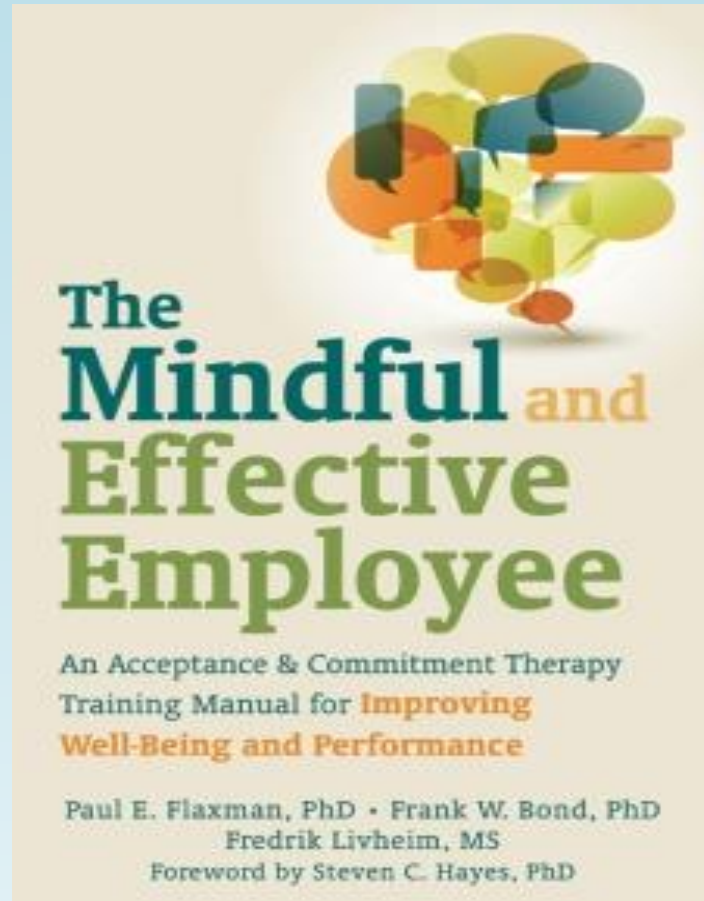
# Why ACT for ABA staff?

- Employees spend 60% of their waking hours working :  
“Good mental Health is Good Business” (Black, 2008)
- Staff in caring professions experience high levels of stress and emotional burn-out
- ABA practitioners spend most of their time training and supervising other people
- Building rapport and establishing a strong therapeutic relationship are key to an intervention’s success

# ACT for ABA Staff: What

- Identify sources of stress and how staff deal with stress at work
- Identify work values: individual and shared
- Increase psychological flexibility
  - Acceptance
  - Mindfulness
  - Defusion
  - Perspective-taking
  - Committed action
- Establish effective interpersonal skills

# ACT for ABA Staff



- ACT for staff in caring professions (e.g., Bethay et al., 2013; Brinkborg et al., 2011; Noone & Hastings, 2009; 2010; Noone, 2013; Smith, & Gore, 2012)
- ACT in organizational settings (e.g., Flaxman & Bond, 2010a; 2010b; Moran, 2011)
- <http://www.mindfulemployee.com/>

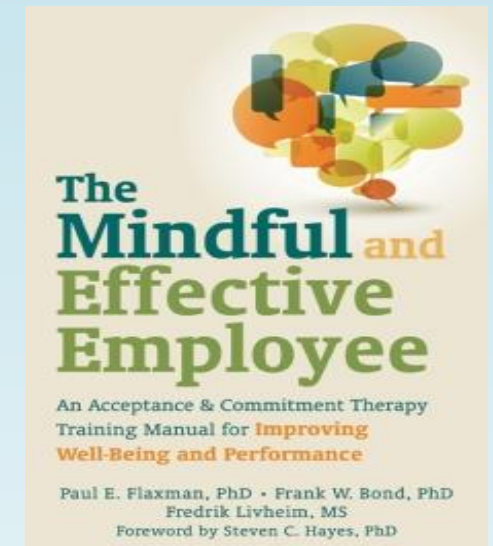
# ACT for ABA Staff

## WHO

- Schedulers
- Office Managers
- Clinical Managers
- Program supervisors / BCBAs
- In-line therapists / behavior technicians
- Clinical Trainers
- Operations / Corporate Managers

## HOW

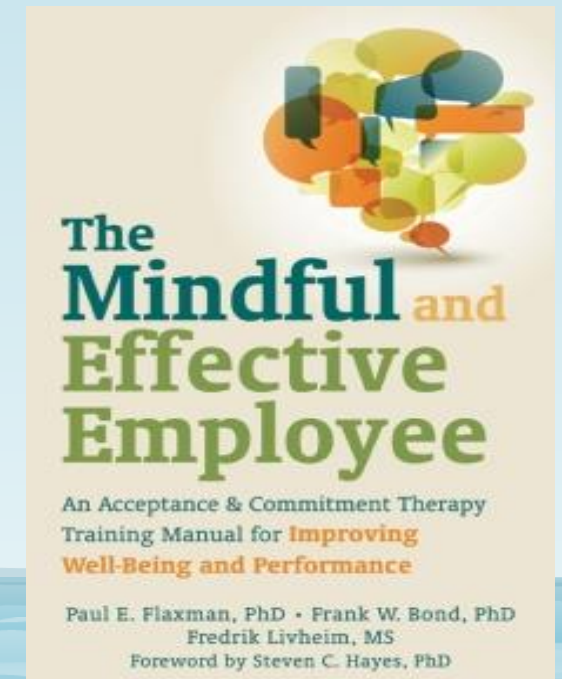
- Group trainings and workshops
- Individual mentorship
- Self-directed





# ACT for Staff: Predicted Outcomes

- Decreased burn-out and stress-related illness
- Increased productivity and well-being at work
- Increased collaborative partnerships and peer support amongst staff
- Improved staff-training outcomes
- Improved parent-practitioner relationships
- Improved parent-training outcomes
- Improved client outcomes





# **ACT for Parents**



# Why ACT for parents?

## Impact of ASD on Families

- Autism diagnosis has significant impact on families (Grindle et al., 2009)
  - Emotional / psychological
  - Financial
  - Social / cultural
- The challenges of raising a child with autism are consistently associated with high levels of parenting stress, relationship difficulties, and mental health issues (Eisenhower, Baker, & Blacher, 2005; Estes, Munson, Dawson, Koehler, Zhou & Abbott, 2009; Tomanik, Harris, & Hawkins, 2004).

# Parents and ABA treatment programs

- Parent involvement is an essential component of effective intervention programs (Matson et al., 2009; National Autism Center, 2009; National Research Council, 2001)
- ABA treatment programs can be a significant source of stress for parents (Grindle et al., 2009)
- Even after seeing significant improvements in child functioning, parents may continue to experience considerable psychological distress (Grindle et al., 2009; Remington et al., 2007)

# Parents and ABA treatment programs

- High levels of psychological distress significantly impacts a parent's ability to manage their child's behavior and can reduce the effectiveness of behavioral interventions for ASD (Osborne, McHugh, Saunders, & Reed, 2008; Symon, 2001).
- Lack of parental participation and non-adherence to treatment recommendations is a common challenge for ABA treatment providers (Allen & Warzak, 2000)

# ACT for parents

ACT may be particularly appropriate for this population due to the chronic nature of the challenges associated with having a child with autism

- ACT may be effective in decreasing maladaptive coping strategies and lowering psychological distress for autism parents (Blackledge & Hayes, 2006)
- Mindful parenting can decrease challenging behavior, non-compliance and self-injurious behaviors of children with autism (Singh et al., 2006)

# ACT for Parents

- Reduce impact of stress on parent behavior (by increasing parent resilience and wellbeing)
- Improve “buy-in” and collaboration with treatment providers
  - Increase parent involvement in child treatment programs
  - Reduce treatment compliance barriers
- Increase parent ability to acquire and apply new parenting skills (leading to improved child outcomes)
- Improve parent well-being and mental health

# ACT for Parents

- **ACT integrated parent training** promoting resilience and psychological well-being, even in the face of extremely challenging circumstances
  - Group trainings and workshops
  - Individual parent training and support
  - Self-directed training
- **Peer groups**: social support can buffer families against stress and create opportunities for peer modeling and shared problem-solving



**ACT for Clients**

# Why ACT for clients?

- Restrictive, repetitive behaviors (RRBs) and inflexible patterns of responding are a common characteristic of ASD
- Individuals with high-functioning autism typically possess strong verbal repertoires and may be particularly susceptible to problematic patterns of behavior related to psychological inflexibility or control by verbal rules



# Why ACT for clients?

- ABA programs typically focus on overt behaviors related to non-verbal stimuli, rather than behavior under the control of verbal processes
- Certain features of ABA programs might foster, or do little to prevent, the development of psychological inflexibility (e.g., rigid rule-following)
- As treatment becomes more effective, more clients experience the dark side of having a “mind”

# Why ACT for clients?

- Improved client outcomes might be achieved if behavior analysts were able to incorporate effective strategies for dealing with problematic covert verbal behavior into ABA-treatment programs.
- ACT may offer ABA practitioners an additional set of tools for decreasing problematic patterns of behavior related to covert verbal processes

# ACT for clients

- Literature on ACT with children and adolescents is in its infancy and there is virtually no published literature on ACT with ASD population
  - Recent pilot study with ASD adolescents (Pahnke et al., 2013)
- Literature on ACT with RRBs is promising
  - Trichotillomania (e.g., Twohig & Woods, 2004)
  - Skin picking (Twohig, Hayes, & Masuda, 2006)

# ACT for clients

- Integrate ACT skills into treatment curricula and make already existing lessons ACT consistent
- Adapt currently available resources e.g., workbooks: “Get out of your mind for teens” (Ciarrochi, Hayes & Bailey); “I just want to be me” (Bowden & Bowden)
- Be mindful of an over-emphasis on rule-following and establishment of excessive pliance
- Ensure that flexibility is programmed for from outset
- Create ACT-consistent skills training and support groups
- Train staff to utilize an ACT approach at work



**Creating a  
Culture:  
Organization-  
wide adoption of  
ACT**

# Organization-wide adoption of ACT

- Decrease staff burn-out
- Increase staff productivity
- Increase effective management and training of staff
- Improved staff retention
- Increase peer support and collaboration
- Ensure quality service provision and best outcomes for clients
- Increase family involvement and improve parent training outcomes
- Increased retention of clients
- Improved client outcomes

# Organization-wide adoption of ACT

- Consider a “top-down” approach
  - Get staff buy-in
  - Put your own oxygen mask on first
- Teach rapport building and therapeutic interpersonal skills
- Conduct research to examine the effects on staff, parents and clients
- Everyone is different: Stay Flexible!
- This stuff is hard! It will be an ongoing process

# Summary

- ABA practitioners should attempt to understand how private events might create barriers to effective clinical work
- ACT offers behavior analysts a variety of strategies for dealing with problematic private events that might interfere with treatment outcomes at several different levels
  - Staff
  - Parents
  - Clients





**THANK YOU**

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