What is Verbal Behavior (VB)?

A mother and her child are sitting on their living room floor with a Mr. Potato Head toy. Mom is holding all the pieces while her child holds the empty potato. Mom asks, "What do you need?" The child says, "Shoes." Mom asks, "What color are those shoes?" The child responds, "Blue." Mom says, "Stand Mr. Potato Head on the floor" and then says "where do you put shoes?'' The child responds, "On my feet." Mom says, "Tell me something else you wear on your feet." The child says, "Slippers." Mom asks, "When do you wear slippers?" Her child responds, "At bed time." Mom asks, "What do you want?" The Child says, "Eyes." And the game continues.

This may seem like a fairly typical scene that could be played out in the home of any preschooler. Let's re-examine this scenario from a Verbal Behavior perspective, looking at the many different verbal operants used. Mom asks, "What do you need?" The child says, "Shoes." The first response the child makes is a mand (request). Mom asks, "What color are those shoes?" The child responds, "Blue." That next response is a tact, labeling the color of the shoes. Mom says, "Stand Mr. Potato Head on the floor." This response, putting Mr. Potato Head on the floor, is the response to a receptive direction. When asked, "Where do you put shoes?" The child responds, "On my feet." The response the child gives is an intraverbal response. Intraverbals include conversational language skills such as the ability to answer questions. Mom says, "Tell me something else you wear on your feet." The child says, "Slippers." This is also an intraverbal and it corresponds to naming other items in a class, i.e. things you wear on your feet. Mom asks, "When do you wear slippers?" Her child responds, "At bed time." This also requires an intraverbal response, answering a "wh" question. Mom asks, "What do you want?" The child requests, "Eyes." The last item returns us to where we started, the prompt for a mand.

What appeared to be a simple game was actually a well-conceived lesson plan developed by this mom to help teach her child language. She took advantage of her child's strong motivation for a favorite toy to teach the skills mentioned above. This would not have worked nearly as well with a toy or game that the child had no interest in. This is an example of Natural Environment Teaching also known as NET teaching.

Think about how typically-developing children learn language and other skills. Go into any preschool classroom and what will you find? Will you see three and four year olds sitting at a desk with books and pencils and paper? Probably not. It's more likely that you will find them at play in some capacity. Preschool classrooms are full of toys, games, and craft items. They usually have well-equipped classrooms and storage closets filled with paints, markers, and crayons. Chances are there is an easel in one corner and a box of clothes for "dress-up" in another. This should give us a clue about how typically-developing children learn. They learn through play. Go into a classroom for autistic preschoolers and what will you see? Well, that depends on the class, but often you will see children at desks and tables being asked to identify colors, letters, and body parts many times in a row. Why the disconnect? If typically developing preschoolers need play to learn, doesn't it stand to reason that autistic children also need play to learn? In fact, doesn't it make sense that they need a lot of play?

Now wait a minute – don't children with autism need specialized intervention??? What about ABA? What about the surgeon general's recommendation for ABA as the preferred treatment for children with autism? Don't they need Verbal Behavior? Don't they need assessments and individualized lesson plans? Do you honestly expect us to believe that children can learn from a plastic vegetable? And isn't that too many carbs anyway?

OK, calm down. All your questions will be answered in the order they were asked:
Yes.
ABA is all over this scenario.
 We agree.
Yes.
Yes.
Yes, they can if they really, really like Mr. Potato Head and have not had free and open access to it.
Plastic food items don't count.

What you really need to take away from this little exercise is some understanding of the value of the Natural Environment, especially for early learners. The early learner profile can be described as follows: Limited basic skills with a weak echoic (ability to repeat others), almost no formal mands (requesting ability), few
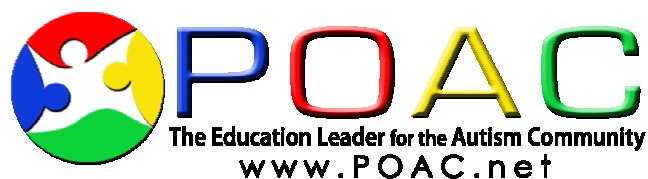
receptive responses outside of the context, few tacts (labels) and intraverbals. Children who fit this profile usually don't have the skills to sit through a lot of intensive teaching or ITT. They should spend a lot of time manding and having their teachers and environment paired with positive reinforcement so that they will want to be involved with their teachers and will not find the classroom or its contents aversive. The NET provides the perfect environment for this.

The child in the example would meet the profile for an intermediate learner. An intermediate learner typically has a repertoire that includes several mands (requests), many tacts (labels), some receptive skills including feature, function, and class (RFFC) and tacting of feature, function, and class (TFFC), and some simple intraverbals. The advanced learner repertoire includes many spontaneous mands, manding for information (asking "wh"questions), complex tacts, TFFC and intraverbals that include answering "wh" questions.

Once a child has a probed ABLLS (Assessment of Language and Learning Skills) a teacher and/or parent can choose objectives from that assessment to work on in the NET. In the example above, the following ABLLS goals were addressed:
F3 Requesting with the reinforcer present and when asked "what do you want?"
G2 Labels common objects
C8 Follow instructions in routine situations
H 17 Answers "where" questions
H13 Multiple responses given specific categories
H21 Answers "when" questions

By teaching in the context of a motivating game the mom made the task enjoyable, easy, and the skills more likely to generalize. Her demands were things that the child had mastered and if he or she had any difficulty with the answers, she would have made it errorless. That is to say she would have given the answer as a prompt and then re-presented the question for the child to answer without the prompt. This is known as a transfer trial. So you can see that with a few skills, i.e. errorless teaching, pairing, use of the transfer trial, and a little information, i.e. objectives gleaned from the child's ABLLS and a knowledge of what targets he or she has mastered, this mom was able to take a simple afternoon activity and make it into a NET activity plan.

Another benefit of NET teaching is that there is often a reduced amount of unwanted or escape motivated behavior. It did require some knowledge, training, and preparation on her part, but think of how much more challenging it would be to spend the afternoon with a child with no functional language skills and no notion of how to teach them.

Had this child been more of an early learner, the mom could have put more emphasis on pairing and manding. There would have been errorless teaching of mands with prompt fading. Easy demands would be faded in slowly and reinforcers would be abundant. For a more advanced learner, again a reinforcing game or activity would be the center point. There may be more intraverbal objectives such as answering "wh" questions and the manding would be more advanced, such as manding for information or asking "wh" questions.

With any of these scenarios the goal should always be to begin moving teaching to more intensive settings such as the table or desk gradually based on the child or student's success. While it is important to use the child's motivation to teach, there is much that the child must learn that is not related to the things he or she finds reinforcing. Mands are very easy to teach in the NET, but other skills may be better suited to the intensive teaching environment. NET and ITT both have advantages and disadvantages. According to Partington and Sundberg, "It is most important to consider the existing skills of the individual child when determining how to best approach his language needs. The balance between DTT (intensive teaching) and NET may change frequently during the language acquisition process, but training should always include both approaches."

Bottom line -- If you are a teacher, don't underestimate the value of teaching in the NET. If you are a parent, even if you have limited teaching skills, you can be a huge part of your child's learning experience.