

Scholarship Essay

He wanted something, but I had no idea what it could be. My cousin, autistic and non-verbal, appeared to me with a desire, but for what I could not understand. He pointed and gestured until I looked at the image on the iPad: juice. It was a simple request, but I truly appreciated how this moment of human connection came at such a monumental effort for him. I was so happy to be able to give him something he needed, but more so for me, enjoying this moment of connection with my cousin would orient the direction of my entire life.

In college, I looked toward a psychology and counseling program, always with an eye toward working with children with special needs on the autism spectrum. At the same time, I became passionate about applied behavior analysis related research and dedicated my time and energy shadowing researchers and investigating methods involving ABA and mand training exercises, including video enhanced behavioral modification.

During that time, I also began working in the XXX Center where, after becoming an integral part of the team there, I began to play a leadership role. There, and later in my work with XXX Schools, I studied a wide range of behavioral concepts, implementing functional behavior assessments, functional analysis, and developing and implementing behavior support plans. The most rewarding work, of course, was helping the development of students. At the XXX Center, I was able to connect with students who were exhibiting a range of severely challenging behaviors. In one instance, a child who was just XX years old, was acting out so much that he could not sit in his chair. His behavior was qualified as difficult and aggressive, and I was to oversee a trial that was the last stop in seeing if he could learn in a public school setting. It was difficult to work, but thrilling to see how he could accomplish during our time together. All that being said, he was ultimately deemed too aggressive for the public school setting. This was disappointing for me, but it made me consider how mand training might be further expanded into social behavioral conditioning, where up to now it had been mostly designed for communication-related behaviors.

After completing my Master's and working in the field, I was certain I wanted to be a part of a PhD program in ABA at a research-based institution. Now, as I look toward board certification, I am working with a caseload of eight students, engaging with them at school, performing direct service in the classroom, creating behavior support plans and progress reports, and working collaboratively with teachers, parents, and other support specialists. However, individualized services are only one part of my experience. While at XXX Schools, I began classroom-wide interventions incorporating the principles of ABA. In addition, I became very interested in training strategies for staff and parents so they can better serve children, even when not in school.

I was thrilled to be accepted to the doctoral studies at University where rigorous coursework will provide opportunities to grow dramatically as a behavior analyst and scholar. I now seek a fellowship to help me gain practical supervisory experience with the opportunity to mentor master students. Having this fellowship will hone my ability to learn in an applied clinical setting and expand my knowledge of ABA research. I am particularly excited to work with the esteemed XXX University ABA faculty and be a part of the XXX Center for Autism and Applied Analysis. I greatly look forward to the possibility of learning from Dr. XXX whose work on video modeling and communication fits perfectly in line with my research interests. Additionally, I find myself inspired by the way in which XXX University provides resources in research and helps integrate individuals diagnosed with autism into the community, providing consultations and parent support like nowhere else.

For my future, I am focused on research in advancing topics such as verbal behavior, specifically mand training, functional communication training (FCT), and the effects of video modeling on social skills. I am also interested in behavior skills training, treatment integrity, generality, prompt fading, and self-monitoring. My intention is to delve more deeply into these topics to find ways to expand their uses and maximize their effectiveness. In particular, I want to look into how mand training can target social development as well as ways of reducing prompt dependency. My further hope is to work more thoroughly on training methods for parents and other professionals through the adoption of a behavior skills approach. After receiving my doctorate, my intention is to work for a clinic doing in school and home consultations. However, after building my experience, my larger goal is to teach for a university and to help develop the next generation of researchers in this important field. While pursuing the specialization in developmental disabilities at XXX University, this fellowship would provide vital practical experience to lead me toward these future goals. My hope, as it was all those years ago when getting my cousin a simple drink of juice, is to improve the lives of children with special needs, so they can communicate more effectively and integrate more easily.

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