



TURN AUTISM AROUND
WITH DR. MARY BARBERA

Transcript for Podcast Episode: 021
*Sasha Long-Teacher & BCBA:
Multidisciplinary Collaboration*

Hosted by: Dr. Mary Barbera

Mary: You're listening to the Turn Autism Around podcast, episode number 21. In today's episode, I am talking to Sasha Long, who is a certified teacher and a behavior analyst and she has her own podcast called The Autism Helper. So we're going to get talking to her real soon.

Mary: But before I do that, I want to give a shout out a five star review that was left on iTunes by LissyOT. She said, "best course in ABA." She said, "I've been in the early intervention autism field for five years now. Up until this point I've had some ABA training but never this clear and so practical. I'm looking forward to helping implement some of this at our EI center and continuing to help out the parents. You're a game changer. God bless." Well thank you so much Lissy, and I know you're going to like this interview with Sasha Long, so let's get to that.

Welcome to the Turn Autism Around podcasts for both parents and professionals in the autism world who want to turn things around, be less stressed and lead happier lives. And now your host, autism mom, behavior analyst, and bestselling author, Dr. Mary Barbera.

Mary: Okay, so today I have a very special guest. Her name is Sasha Long and she's the founder and president of The Autism Helper, and she's a board certified behavior analyst, and a certified special education teacher. And after teaching in a self-contained special education classroom, Sasha now works full time as a consultant, writer, and behavior analyst. She manages and writes The Autism Helper blog as a way to share, easy to use and ready to implement strategies and ideas. And she also travels internationally as a speaker and consultant. And she started a podcast called The Autism Helper, which is how I found Sasha back in December of 2018 right before I started this podcast. And she's currently an adjunct professor in the school of applied behavior analysis at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology. So welcome to the podcast, Sasha.

Sasha: Thank you, Mary.

Mary: Yeah, it's great. I don't think we've ever met in person yet, but I'm sure we will in the near future. But I'm really excited to have you on because I've listened to a couple of your podcast episodes and it seems that you've done a great job, and it seems like we really have pretty similar philosophies, like we're both interested in getting things, you know, simplified so that everybody can benefit. So I think we have a lot in common.

Sasha: Yes. Actually your book is the first one I recommend to people because I think it connects to so many different groups, parents, teachers, clinicians, everyone can understand it and connect to it.

Mary: Well thank you. Thank you. So why don't you tell me and my listeners about your fall into the autism world and how you get started in the field of special education and behavior analysis?

Sasha: Like a lot of people... fall into it is the right phrase, because I did kind of fall into it and then you fall in love. So I was, you know, young in high school trying to figure out... declare a major in school. I thought I wanted to do social work, ended up doing special ed, and didn't really have any experience working with kids with autism, but took a job at 21 years old, my first teaching job, and had no idea what to do in a self-contained autism classroom.

Sasha: And you know, it was like boot camp that year, trying to figure out what works and what doesn't. And when I talk to teachers a lot, that special ed undergrad degree, it's just so broad like your licensed to teach preschool self-contained, all the way through to a junior in high school resource room precal class. Like you just can't possibly be an expert in all those areas. So I felt really lost my first few years but also really loved it. Loved the kids. I knew that, you know, I was never going to be bored in this field and, you know, obviously really stayed in the field. So.

Mary: And then how did you come to become a behavior analyst?

Sasha: So you know, through the process of trying to figure out what the heck to do in my classroom and looking, you know, this is before Pinterest, this is before you know, teacher blogs, all of these cool ideas. I was just hungry for any direction and in trying to figure out how to, you know, better my students and the classroom and do the right thing, the biggest problem that I kept running into was how to reduce problem behavior and then how to teach new skills. Like there just wasn't enough information out there. And then I fell into the field of applied behavior analysis. And luckily there was a program in Chicago and I, you know, they didn't really have a part time program then, but I kind of have to part time program so I could go at night while I was teaching, which was so amazing

because I could learn strategies on a Tuesday night, come to school on Wednesday and be like, oh my gosh, I'm going to do this today.

Sasha: So it was fun to put everything into practice right away, and to put it into a practice in a public school classroom with, you know, only one aide with nine kids, with kids that didn't have the right placement, but they were going to be there tomorrow. So it was fun to see all those strategies really still work in that setting.

Mary: And what, um, what was the makeup of your classroom? What ages were you teaching when you were pursuing your ABA Certification?

Sasha: I taught junior high, so fifth through eighth grade. I always thought I wanted the babies. Like I always like I wanted preschool. They're so cute. And I took the job that I did because it had other self-contained classrooms in the building, which was not my experience when interviewing. And it's not my experience, you know, consulting now. A lot of teachers are on an island, they're alone. They're the only self-contained teacher maybe in their building or sometimes district.

Sasha: So I liked that the school I was at had other, you know, self-contained teachers. And then I stayed there for a long time because my principal gave me a lot of freedom. You know, he really wanted me to figure out... he knew he didn't know the best practices, which I think is a move of a great leader to know when you don't know.

Sasha: So he gave me a lot of freedom. You know, I did my thesis in my classroom. I did my supervision hours in my classroom. I really got to explore new strategies and trial and error and all that fun stuff. So that comes with being a young teacher. So I had junior high, so it was kind of funny, I'm five feet tall, so all of... I had mostly boys for many of the years. All of my boys were like several heads taller than me. Um, but it was always, I, you know, I really liked that age.

Mary: Yeah. Wow. So what year would it be? Did you become certified as a behavior analyst?

Sasha: Oh my gosh. Um, yeah, let me think about that. 2013? Yeah, 2013.

Mary: Okay. So you mentioned that you, you know... You were teaching way before things like Pinterest and things like that. And I know, I think that's how you started getting more involved in the social media world is, is through teachers helping teachers? Is that right?

Sasha: Teachers Pay Teachers.

Mary: Teachers Pay Teachers. So, so a lot of people probably don't know what that is. So can you, um, tell, tell us what that is... Or even how you kind of ventured into, did you start with Pinterest or how did you start making your way into the online world?

Sasha: Yeah, so, um, you know, I, like I said, I was really always hungry for ideas, kind of kept working on building up my classroom, and within my district they often kept sending people to come observe in my room or take pictures and I would hear from the other teachers like, Oh, I saw pictures of your classroom at one of the administrators training. And you know, they wouldn't always get credit with some types bothered me. Um, so I wanted to, I thought about starting a website to share ideas and then someone told me about Teachers Pay Teachers.com.

Sasha: And this was five, six years ago, I went on the website and looked for special ed resources to see if there's anything I could use. And there was almost nothing. So I was like, well, interesting. I spend all my time making resources for my class. This could be a cool way to share what I'm doing.

Sasha: So Teachers Pay Teachers is a marketplace where teachers can go online and post resources, lesson plans, different activity ideas that teachers can buy as a digital download and print and use in their classroom. It's kind of like an Etsy kind of thing. So I started doing that. Um, I was always really passionate about, you know, about creating great curricular resources. That was something I always felt was super lacking in the field was, was the stuff like... you know, as a young teacher you have eight students and I kind of, I joke, I think of myself as a 21 or 22 year old waiting. Like, what, when did, when do I get the things like when, when did the books to teach Johnny to read? And they're like, no, no, no. You have to make those things and it's, and it's overwhelming. And if you have six grade levels, you know, students working at a preschool level, students work in eighth grade level, how do you possibly find the time to make all that stuff?

Sasha: So, and I think then teachers fall into routine sometimes of you know, not differentiating enough or keeping everything too easy just because they don't have enough material. So, I'm really passionate about making sure we still have that rigor and high expectations for all students. So it was, I really became really passionate about creating curricular resources and different ways and seeing my activities in different people's classrooms is just so amazing. Like teachers use my resources in Sri Lanka and India and in Canada and it's, it's so cool to see those activities in classrooms around the world.

Mary: Wow. Wow. So, okay, so you were working in a classroom and you were using Teachers Pay Teachers, and so then how did you, um, so you're no longer working in the classroom full time. You're, you're more of a consultant now, is that right?

Sasha: Yeah... I did both for a little bit, but you know, as you know, it happens with everyone, you know, your self-care becomes important. And you know, I was, this was before I had kids and I was basically working two full time jobs cause I would teach all day and come home and be on my website and building up all of these materials all night. And I started doing some speaking, which was great. And something I never thought I would do. Schools were asking me to come out and do professional developments... But at some point, you know, something had to give. So I did have to step back from the teaching role, which was sad because I loved, you know, obviously my students. But now I'll work with different classroom teachers either on Skype doing consulting or coming into schools and doing consulting that way.

Mary: Okay. And are you in the Chicago area?

Sasha: Yeah, I'm in the Chicago area.

Mary: Okay. And then you're also an adjunct professor. How, how much do you teach?

Sasha: I'm not teaching right now because my schedule with speaking got a little bit too busy this year. But I taught ethics of bunch, which is kind of funny that I've really liked to teach ethics. Um, because I think that not all adjuncts always want to teach that course. And I really, I taught supervision, um, for several years in a row, so the practicum course, and that I really loved too, because hearing about the different fields that everyone's working in and kind of that opportunity to collaborate with, you know, future BCBAs, and talking about the different situations they're in and what skills they're working on and what type of clients that are working in was always really great. So I'm hoping to teach another course this fall, hopefully, when my schedule gets a little bit more consistent.

Mary: It's never going to calm down. I remember years ago, my sister came in and my dining room table had a bunch of papers and I was in the middle of a lot of stuff and I'm like, oh well in the spring, you know, things should calm down. And she looked at me, she's like, Mary, you've been saying that for like five years now. Like stop it. It's not going to calm down. It's just going to be different and it's going to continue to be crazy. And I'm like, okay, I'll stop saying that. I had to interject that little piece of advice. Um, okay. So that's interesting. Let's talk a little bit about um, ethics and supervision first. First we'll tackle the ethics, because I didn't know that about you, that you taught ethics. And I have as part of my verbal behavior bundle course, I have a four hour ethical series with Dr. Eileen Schwartz and Dr. Megan Miller and Dr. Amanda Kelly and Rosemary Griffin who also teaches as an adjunct and an ethics.

Mary: So, and I know, I don't know if you know this, but like half of my listeners are parents and then half are professionals and behavior analysts and teachers and

so forth. So I mean we don't want to get too heavy, but I do think that there are, you know, a lot of ethical concerns and common ethical issues in the field of autism. You know, and I know we're, you know, we may get off on a little tangent here, but you know, what are the top couple of ethical issues that are facing our field in your, in your perspective, from your perspective?

Sasha: I think my answer might be, I dunno, non-traditionals maybe not the right word, but I think I actually just did a presentation at Illinois ABA conference, ILABA last month about best practices for collaboration, and basically how as a BCBA to collaborate and build teams with teachers and parents the best way. And I tied it in to the ethical standards because I see such an issue with not wanting to collaborate; not wanting to be a teammate; not wanting to, like, for being non behavioral here, being respectful of other professionals and it's specifically in our ethical guidelines that, you know, we need to work collaboratively with other team members and it outlines how to do that appropriately and still be an evidence based practice. But you know, I, you know, my heart dies a little bit when I walk into an IEP meeting and I introduced myself as the BCBA and someone rolls their eyes or someone makes a face because they've met a BCBA who rubbed them the wrong way and was disrespectful to their field.

Sasha: And I was talking to one of my good friends, who's an SLP the other day and a behavior therapist not a BCBA... They're being trained by a BCBA said to her, oh, we don't have to worry about speech and OT goals. We can do that in our ABA sessions. And she was like, well, hey, like my speech goals are valid. And the OT was standing right there and were like, my OT goals are valid really, you know, discrediting their work. And yes it wasn't a BCBA, but when we kind of even throw in that supervision piece that BCBA is responsible for everything that comes out of that behavior therapist mouth or that RBTs mouth.

Sasha: And I think that's a bigger undertaking then BCBA's take on sometimes... They don't realize that they're taking on that you're responsible for that RBT or that behavior therapist for how they're communicating with teams. So I don't know. Do you see the same thing?

Mary: I definitely see the same thing. I see this as kind of a knee jerk reaction by a lot of behavior analysts that as soon as I hear anything, you know the child's on a gluten casein free diet. Well that's ridiculous. That's... I don't want to work with the child. It's like whoa, whoa, whoa buddy. Like calm, you know, calm down and not everything... And one of the interesting things when I interviewed Dr. Eileen Schwartz for the ethical series, and she is writing a book on ethics in the behavior analysis field and she was awesome. I had seen her speak at a conference and so I wanted to have her on, but she really described like the ethical code for us behavior analysts as you know, a code that we need to follow but you can, you know, once you adhere to this, this part of the code you

actually don't adhere to this part of the code. It was kind of like a whack-a-mole and it's not, it's not all cut and dry, black and white.

Mary: It's like... it's all gray and so you have the, you know, we need to be respectful of OT and, and then we need to know how to discuss putting a weighted vest on a child that may actually, like the parent may want that. It may actually be in the IEP, and then how are we going to work to get like some data on that, and talk about the stigma that may be attached to that? Talk about some of the experiences that I've had in the past with weighted vests and how it can often backfire. But without getting into the, that's against our code. It's not evidence based, I'm out because you know, working in schools, that's just not the way it rolls. Ever.

Sasha: Yeah. And we're a human service industry at the end of the day. We really are. Like we're working with people, we're working with parents and families and teams and we can't, you know, the way you explained it is so correct, it's that knee jerk reaction that you would be so much more effective to spend the time being like, yeah, let's as a team explore weighted bath and let's, you know, let's explain a mom that this isn't an evidence based practice, but let's take some data and let's talk about the pros and cons and let the team come to that decision because you're not the leader of the team. Like we're not, you know, we're not the head honcho. Everyone went to as much school as we did. I always tell behavior analysts that a lot; like OTs go to two years; speech pathologists go to two years. Like they all got their Masters also. So... No one's going to listen to us later if we offend them right off the bat. So it does become an ethical issue then.

Mary: Right. And then my college age son told me, you know, a lot of the kids at college are getting a weighted blankets, it helps them sleep better. And it's like, who am I to say there's no evidence to... I think, you know, there might be something to it. And just because there's no 1980 study to show that, you know, weighted blankets do anything for sleep. Like who am I to say that it's never going to work? I mean it might work. And so I think a lot of my background too, because I was a nurse... I still am a registered nurse, but I worked in a rehab setting early on, like in the late eighties and so I worked with OTs and speech and PT and we did team goals and we were all working towards independence and self-care and all that stuff.

Mary: So I came in to the field of ABA, much more like interdisciplinary focus and aware of team goals. And I think that's really helped me. And then I'm also a parent so I can put that hat on. So it's, it's, it's very interesting, but I totally agree with what you said about ethics. So let's talk about supervision for a little bit. Um, so what are, what do you think are the key issues in terms of supervision? You had alluded to like the RBTs, and that's a registered behavior technician that's kind of like an aide or a therapist up, you know, bachelors or even you can even have

less than a bachelor's degree. Like in some situations where you could have high school diploma and become an RBT. Is that correct?

Sasha: Yeah. Yeah.

Mary: So what are some of the, um, supervision issues that you see that people, that you help people with?

Sasha: Yeah. Um, so I don't do any supervision right now because it's a lot of time. And for the supervisor, I mean also like it's a lot of math to figure out, you know, as someone who wants to become a BCBA, if you're getting your supervision hours, you need to have the right percentage of, you know, group supervision and individual supervision and it's a lot of time. So, like I said, you know, when a BCBA takes on a supervisee, so saying, yeah, I'll supervise you. It's not just a, oh yeah, no problem, we'll email every now and then. Like it's, you're really kind of taking them under your way. It kinda throwing it back to the ethics conversation. It's not just about you know, how to implement the strategies we're doing, talking about that whole context of the gray areas and how to communicate with parents effectively, and even maybe the business aspect of being a behavior analyst if you wanted to open your own practice. So I think there's a lot of, there's a lot more that goes into it than just meeting those requirements, which are a lot too. So I think for BCBA's, really thinking about how many supervisees you take on to make sure that you can still do your job and then really adequately provide that supervision. Um, so students are getting everything they need to not only sit for the exam and pass the exam, but then be a great behavior analyst going forward.

Mary: Yeah, it's a big responsibility and I haven't supervised for a few years related to the same issues that you're discussing. Okay. So you... I just kind of wanted to find out what you do currently. So you speak a little bit, you consult on a regular basis, schools and online. And then are you still doing the Teachers Pay Teachers?

Sasha: Yeah, so I do a little bit of everything right now. Um, so yeah, I still create curriculum for teachers. A lot of parents use it in home, which I love. Um, right now I only sell through Teachers Pay Teachers mostly cause that's just a marketplace that does it all for me. I am looking into hopefully within the next year and a half having a way for school districts to purchase resources directly through me. So I know that's a big hurdle, you know, not always having... school districts can currently purchase from Teachers Pay Teachers, but just having another way because school districts do have money for resources, especially curriculum. So making sure, kind of connecting the curriculum that I have and resources that I have with school districts.

Sasha: So I do that. And then I manage the blog. We now have seven different bloggers, including myself. So we have interdisciplinary team, we have an SLP, an OT, a parent, and then four teachers ranging from preschool through high school. Um, so everyone blogs different days and myself. So it's kind of a nice, um, you know, well rounded, hopefully viewpoint of everything. So there's a little bit of everything for everyone.

Sasha: So we have the blog and then I do the podcast and then travel. You know, my travel schedule picks up in, in a few weeks here. So spring and summer I go to a lot of school districts and conferences to doing PDs for teachers, parents, kind of usually a diverse group on anything from data collection to best practices for behavior reduction or ways to teach literacy, things like that. So every day's a little different.

Mary: So you're, I didn't know about your blog, but is everything housed at theautismhelper.com?

Sasha: Yup. Yup. The autismhelper.com. Yeah. So we usually have four new blogs go out a week on different topics. You know, with photos or videos, kind of explaining different ways to do things. And we added, you know, expanded the blogger team by three people in the fall. And everyone is just, it's, they're so great, they share such creative ideas. Like I get excited now to go on my own website, like oh what did Jed write about today? And what did Sarah write about today? So it's fun kind of hearing from different perspectives about similar topics, too.

Mary: Yeah. So why did you start your podcast and can you tell our listeners what your podcast... What your focus is and who listens and that sort of thing?

Sasha: Yeah. So I'd been blogging for about five years and my husband actually kept telling me about to like, you should do a podcast. We should do a podcast. And I honestly, this was maybe a year ago, I didn't really listen to podcasts. Like I was late to the podcast game and I regretted that. So I myself, I was like, let me start listening to podcasts. I don't know what this podcasting is. I was like, you downloaded, do you buy it? So I started listening to podcasts and I am like an efficiency person. Like I am all about efficiency. So I loved that I could listen to podcasts while I was commuting. I could listen to podcasts while I was in the airport. So I liked the idea of having another way for busy teachers, busy parents to listen to my content and learn. So that was kind of where it started from that now we have, if you want to watch videos, we have videos. If you want to read the blog, you can read the blog and if you're a podcast person, we have podcasts. So that was kind of where it started and I really loved it because I think it can be in some ways a little bit more informal, but also you can get more in depth in topics and you know, interviewing people has been really fun. That's

like a brand new, you know, skill set for me. So yeah, it's been, it's been like a fun adventure on launching the podcast.

Mary: And you do some solo shows and some interviews or one of each?

Sasha: Yeah, we do a little bit of both. Um, some solo, some interviews, and then we've done a few Q and A episodes where I'll have people submit some questions and just answer a whole bunch of unrelated random questions. Um, so yeah, so it's been a nice little kind of combo, um, different types of episodes.

Mary: Great. And you're on iTunes at The Autism Helper as well?

Sasha: Yes. Yeah. And we're on basically any podcast platform: Stitcher, Spotify, um, I don't know all the names. Yes. It's The Autism Helper podcast.

Mary: Right. Cool. Alright. So, um, part of my goal for this podcast is to not only talk about strategies that can help the kids, but also to help parents and professionals be less stressed and lead happier lives. And you had mentioned that you were working so much in two separate fulltime jobs that you got... you know, you weren't up with your self-care. So I know, and you have, you have children of your own now too. So how, what, what advice do you give people, parents and professionals in terms of self-care and taking care of yourself?

Sasha: I think, you know, I'm always looking for that Holy Grail answer that like, as I think we all are. Like the magic thing and I think we'll never have perfect balance. Like knowing that it'll always be a work in progress and something that I'm working towards that personally always helps me feel better that I'm never just going to achieve like... This is it Tuesday, Tuesday, one o'clock, I have achieved the perfect work life balance. You know, it's always going to be something that you're working towards. And I am all about like... My followers. I talk about these things all the time. I'm all about to-do lists. I'm all about checklists. I'm all about systems. A lot of my stress will come from thinking I'm going to forget about something. So I'm always about, you know, putting those systems in place so I don't forget things.

Sasha: And then really having like boundaries and rules for myself. Um, you know, like I mentioned when I was in a period of my life working two jobs and doing all this, like my body was yelling at me to slow down. Like I just shared this on insta stories this week. I went through a phase where I would leave gym shoes at the gym. I would go work out in the morning, change, go to work, just leave my gym shoes. Like did this several times, like my body was telling me you're doing too much and I wasn't listening.

Sasha: So listening to your body... Work will be, their emails will always be there. The to-do list will always be there. Even when you get to the bottom one, you're going to add more. So it's never going to be finished. So I'm, you know, a big rule govern behavior person. I have rules like I don't open my laptop on certain weekend days when I'm with my kids. I tried to put my phone on do not disturb and put it somewhere else. Um, and setting those boundaries for yourself and then, you know, having grace when you, when you slip up, you know, when you do too much and you don't listen to your rules, you know, not getting mad at yourself because it doesn't make it better.

Mary: Yeah. Yeah. So I think I really enjoyed talking to you and I'm hearing about your journey and I think it's so great to have teachers like you that become behavior analysts or even teachers that don't become behavior analysts, but teachers that really are very interested in working with parents and to help each child reach their fullest potential and, and trying to make things better for everyone. You know, trying to get materials out there to the masses so that people don't have to just start over and reinvent the wheel each day, every class in all parts of the world. So I really give you a lot of credit for, for managing to figure out a lot of the online stuff that is complicated and... but we're in a good position because there's so much need. And, um, I think, you know, the more podcasts about autism, the better.

Mary: I was telling you that when I began to do research for my podcast, I decided in December of 2018 I am doing a podcast in January and I started to do research, there really were very, very few autism podcasts. There was The Behavioral Observations and a few, you know, ABA Inside Track and on a few other behavioral ones, but it just in terms of general autism, content, I couldn't find any that were still active.

Mary: And then when I started mine, then people told me, oh, it's Sasha Long has one. And Dr. Amanda Kelly has her Behavior Babe podcast and I was, I was like, great, let me listen to these because I know the more information we can get out there, the better. The more we can support each other and you know, really help the masses the better. So I am thrilled that you took the time to come on this show today to help our listeners. So check Sasha out at theautismhelper.com and I am... I'm going to be doing that. I'm going to be subscribing to your blog and, and looking at, at your content because I feel like we're very aligned.

Sasha: Yeah. And I love your message, too. And like you said, the more, the better. You know, disseminating ABA in a way that everyone understands. Like I'm as, as I know you are like passionate about, you know, speaking in language that parents can understand so we can all benefit from the science. And I think that's sometimes what intimidated teachers maybe that, you know, the language, all this sounds really technical and really hard. I'm like, it's not like we can break it

down and make it easy. So, you know, I love your resources that are easy to consume. Watching a five minute video is something a parent or a teacher really has time for.

Mary: Right, right. And we just have to keep producing lots of different ways, you know, videos, written blogs, podcasts and each with our own individual slant on, on things. But I do think that it is helping the whole world, so I'm excited to see where you're going to go in the next few years. Um, and uh, thanks so much for joining us today.

Sasha: Thank you.

Thanks for listening to the Turn Autism Around podcast with Dr. Mary Barbera. For more information, visit marybarbera.com.