



TURN AUTISM AROUND
WITH DR. MARY BARBERA

Transcript for Podcast Episode: 049

ABA Training Issues & Kristen's Journey to a PhD in Applied Behavior Analysis

Hosted by: Dr. Mary Barbera

Dr. Mary Barbera: You're listening to another episode of the Turn Autism Around podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Mary Barbera, and today I have a special guest, Kristen Colyer, who is a BCBA and the director of children's services for the mid-Atlantic human service corporation running the POW center; that's in Maryland.

Dr. Mary Barbera: Kristin is taking courses to pursue her PhD in applied behavior analysis, and Kristen was one of our first participants in my online course back in 2015. I've met Kristin a number of times in person as well, and she remains a Facebook adviser for our online courses and community. So I wanted to have Kristen on to talk about her pursuit of a PhD and also the struggles she sees facing the field of ABA as well as parents and professionals. So it was a great interview, and I hope you love it as much as I do.

Welcome to the Turn Autism Around podcast 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.

Dr. Mary Barbera: Welcome. It's so great to have you on, Kristen.

Dr. Kristen Colyer: Thank you. It's good to be here.

Dr. Mary Barbera: Great. So I like to start with describing your fall into the autism ABA world. How you got started in this field?

Dr. Kristen Colyer: Well originally I got started as an undergrad. I was in a course, it was a psychology course. It was the psychology of learning, but within that course we learned a lot about it was all ABA. We did had a rat lab and we trained rats and all that. So, but we really learned those basic principles of applied behavior analysis. And I just was like very intrigued by it. So

when I went into graduate school, I kind of geared my graduate degree towards applied behavior analysis. And then later in life I married a man who was a BCBA-D. So I spent a lot of years going to the ABAI conventions and kind of learning more and more about ABA and I just, that's how I became a behavior analyst. And then my career led me some adult service.

Dr. Mary Barbera: What year did you get your graduate degree? Like, what year is this?

Dr. Kristen Colyer: So in 1993, I got my master's degree in human service management, but I had a specialization in there. My internship throughout the two years in my graduate program was in applied behavior analysis. That was in 93, so a while ago. But then I got into autism by the career... My career path kind of led into a school system where they were building a program for children with autism, and I kinda got into it that way. So I was able to use my knowledge of applied behavior analysis to work with children with autism. And then I just... all my learning that way, from that point on, was learning how to work with children with autism using the science of applied behavior analysis.

Dr. Mary Barbera: And so both you and your husband are both working with children and adults with autism?

Dr. Kristen Colyer: Yeah, so my husband works mostly with adults and he works with adults with autism as well as all other intellectual disabilities. He kind of consults throughout the state of Maryland where my main focus is specifically children with autism. My husband is obese a BCBA-D and he teaches the coursework for our college here in Maryland. And he was very, very much into the science

Dr. Mary Barbera: And I've met him a few times as well. So, and you are also pursuing a PhD in applied behavior analysis that right?

Dr. Kristen Colyer: I am, yes I am.

Dr. Mary Barbera: Why did you decide to do that, and where are you going?

Dr. Kristen Colyer: I keep asking myself that same question now. I decided I wanted, I've always wanted my PhD first off, it's kind of just been a lifelong goal to have a PhD. So I found, and I, you know, my first love is applied behavior analysis. So I found this program that was a hybrid program. So, you know, I was, I had young children and going back to school was very difficult, you know, but so to be on campus all the time was just when it worked for my world. But with the PhD, I also didn't want to do a strictly

online program. I feel like having that contact with other professionals is very important. The dissertation process is very... There's a lot that goes to it. So I wanted to have somebody that could help me, guide me through that.

Dr. Kristen Colyer: So I found this hybrid program in Washington DC so I'm on campus every other week and then every other week I'm doing online type of programming. But I feel like it will help me in my career. I am a director of a clinic and I have a lot of BCBAs who work under me. And I feel like having that kind of, that little bit more of knowledge that that science space research background will help me be a better supervisor of those types of... I love my staff for my staff. So that's kind of why I really feel it's important for me and my career to have that next step and my knowledge base, my education.

Dr. Mary Barbera: And do you know your dissertation topic or have you started that?

Dr. Kristen Colyer: So originally it was going to be, and I got this from your yes-no and in your universals, in your intermediate courses, it was originally going to be taking that yes-no for the tac and the mand and seeing if we can get it into the intraverbal. Yes, no, I'm like I'm a cow says moo. Does a cow say Moo? Yes or no. So at the time when I started I was working with more intermediate level children so I would have had the participants for that. And then when I started the clinic and now my children are very intermediate, early learners, brand new diagnosed kids. So I don't have that access to that level. So I was at a panel discussion that you did at ABAI two years ago with Dr. Miller and Steve Ward and Robert Schramm, and Robert Schramm was talking about his seven steps of instructional control and how he really wishes there was research on it. So through you, you introduced me to him and I appreciate it.

Dr. Kristen Colyer: So, our — my dissertation will be using alternative methods to escape extinction for noncompliant behaviors. So using the seven steps and how, you know, showing the difference of how effective the seven steps are in comparison to an escape extinction procedure. So that's what we're doing.

Dr. Mary Barbera: I want to tell you and our listeners that Dr. Megan Miller, who is a very outspoken of about the use of escape extinction, how we should avoid that, she was interviewed for podcast number seven, I believe. So that would be Marybarbera.com/seven to listen to that, about how to avoid escape extinction. So that is excellent. I didn't know.

Dr. Kristen Colyer: Yeah, she's a great fidelity... Keep it in the back of Robert's book that I'm using as like my data collection piece.

Dr. Mary Barbera: Nice. Yeah, I saw Robert Schramm and Megan Miller present years ago at an ABAI conference and I also started using that checklist. But now all of my courses are very much... I've always been about, and even when I worked in the verbal behavior project, always about sanitizing the environment and a lot of the steps that Robert recommends. And now with my online courses, I'm more committed than ever to avoid escape extinction whenever possible.

Dr. Mary Barbera: So, no matter if you have a really little child that you can pick up during a tantrum and you can move to a new location, that is not a good idea in the long run. I mean, unless it's a safety issue where you know, the child is on the ground in the parking lot at Walmart, when safety is a concern, then of course we have to do whatever all the safest possible and keep everybody as safe as possible. But in general, I think the field of ABA has a big problem with the overuse of escape extinction in, and not just practice, but all of our literature basically lays out the fact that we should be using escape extinction. And that just doesn't work for most of our kids.

Dr. Kristen Colyer: Yeah. And even a lot of the procedures that we use, positive reinforcement, all those types of other techniques for besides the same extension up at the end, putting escape extension in it. So that wherever Robert does have the steps, there's no escape extinction at all. So that's why this is kind of like a little bit nicer, you know, then some of the other procedures that we use, nicer for lack of better word. So yeah, it's, it's fun. It's been, I've learned a lot about all the different types of procedures and it's been fun. Yeah. You know, I go into schools a lot and you see the foot cluck tied around the chair, forcing the child to stay at the desk and all that. And here at my clinic I'm like, nope, we don't do any of that. We pair, we make sure the kids find us reinforcing, we do all of the things that you recommend in your early toddler pairing typos course at workshops. So yeah, we don't use the escape extinction unless we, like you said, unless there's a safety concern where you have to.

Dr. Mary Barbera: Yeah. Great. So let's get back to how you found my work. I think you found my book first and then you attended a live workshop, and then I started my online courses and I think you were right out of the gate. One of my very, very first members back in 2015. Do I have that?

Dr. Kristen Colyer: Pretty much. We first met when... Actually, my husband took your one of your workshops at ABAI and then I, a couple years later you did one

again. He's like, I really think you should go to this lady. She does a really great workshop. So I did and I loved it. And then I read your book. Okay. And then you were coming to Maryland to do a two day, I think it was two, was it one or two-day workshop. So I called you, I'm like, Hey, I want to come, you know, can I'd love to meet you. So we met and then when you started your online, I was one of your first customers, click, click, yes, I want this course.

Dr. Mary Barbera: And you were right out of the gate really motivated. You had seen me speak live; you knew my work and so you were really helpful. And then now you know, four years later, four and a half years later you are, you are still within our online courses now. You've been serving as a Facebook adviser for those issues. You also helped me, I did a little retreat with a couple of my Facebook advisers a couple of years ago to help me, you know, really think about how to expand this. And so you were involved with that process as well.

Dr. Mary Barbera: So I feel like you really do know my courses, know my approach. And would you say that my approach is different than other even other verbal behavior approaches? Would you say my, how does my approach kind of differ?

Dr. Kristen Colyer: I definitely think it's different. I kind of only use your approach so it's hard to compare it to others. But I think for the most part, and it kind of goes with where we were talking about with my dissertation, it goes with that pairing and using reinforcement and understanding your learner and knowing what levels to go on and focusing depending on the age of the child, focusing on what functional skills are important for that specific age or milestone that we're on for that child. So I think that's one of the things that's most different about your program. It's that positive piece that I find I like a lot about what you teach people on how to you use the verbal behavior approach with children with autism? That's kind of what I would say.

Dr. Mary Barbera: Okay, good. And I also think another thing that's kind of different and I think you would agree is that I'm very much like, take a step back, look at the whole forest, not the trees. I'm not into what I call tit for tat programming. I'm not into three features from 40 items and everything, you know, depending on the age and the ability level and the goals of the family and what setting they're at, and how much staff you have.

Dr. Kristen Colyer: I agree with that. I, you know, so many people focus on a curriculum and this is what you're supposed to do next and this is what you're saying supposed to do next. And this is... Like you said, they lose sight of the

forest and the importance of teaching skills in a more global way. And you know, not necessarily having to do each step and then a curriculum, you know, I am a big proponent of that individualized instruction and you, you know, you also teach that be specific to the learner that you're keeping your with right at the time and not, Oh well no, this is the next one on the, in the curriculum. This is what you have to do next, you know, do they need to have 20 different times, you know, whatever it might be. And I think people get lost in that. And I think your program teaches us not to get lost in that.

Dr. Mary Barbera: Yeah. Yeah. So you've had a lot of experience over the past, almost 30 years, right? In the field in some capacity. And then you've been a behavior analyst since 2013 so six years as a behavior analyst. And I know in the past you've expressed some frustration about even in public school settings or private school settings, when kids get older, people stop knowing exactly what to do to help these kids. Like they say they don't want to use this or do this because you know we have to work on functional skills and like how do, how do you respond to people that think like ABA or direct instruction or discrete trial is just for little kids?

Dr. Kristen Colyer: Well, I do my best to convince them otherwise. I think that the science of applied behavior analysis can be used. You know, we change behavior and it does, there's no age limit on changing behavior. We might have to look at it through a different lens on how we're going to apply the principles of applied behavior analysis. But it doesn't matter what age you are. If you have a behavior that you want to change, we can analyze that and we can figure out how to make that change.

Dr. Kristen Colyer: Obviously you're going to focus on different types of things that we're teaching, skills. But we can do that definitely through ABA, through the verbal behavior approach. I have had many teachers or professionals say to me, Oh, he's too old for ABA. And I'm always like, well I don't, I don't know what that means. He's too old for ABA?

Dr. Kristen Colyer: So we talk about it and oftentimes it's a matter of, you know, showing somebody how to take what we do with younger children and apply it to older children. And once people say, Oh wow, that really works. And look what we've taught. You know, I've taught nonverbal teenagers to start manding and tacting their environment. And so, it doesn't stop at flop if five or six, you know, it can, we can, we can change this people's behaviors and their language development and all of that using the same principles. I'm a big advocate for it's never too late. We can, we can always...

Dr. Mary Barbera: It's never too late and it's never too early. Yeah, that's what I said.

Dr. Kristen Colyer: Definitely.

Dr. Mary Barbera: And I remember when you were talking about, you know, trying to help teachers realize like the power of ABA and everything, it reminds me of this teacher that I had way back in early part of my career, probably like 2005, and I was in this class and there was a 14 year old with downs syndrome. I think she may have had autism too, but you know, and this teacher was just really annoyed with us. We're trying to get her to mand and she was actually manding but she was becoming like mand monster as you will like.

Dr. Mary Barbera: And this teacher was like, listen, I have all her IEP goals. Like set the table, you know, like it's not going with what I have here. And I'm like, okay, let's, let's teach her to set the table. Like let's go, how do you want her to set the table? Do you want her to carry the plates over or do you want her to stack the utensils on top of the plates or, or how, how do you want her to do it? She's like, Oh, I don't know. You know, I just wanted her to set the table.

Dr. Mary Barbera: But then you know, we helped walk back, okay, how would that look? How can we use? So applied behavior analysis, it's people don't realize it's a science. It's operating all the time whether we believe in it, thinks it works, think it doesn't work. It's like gravity. It's operating.

Dr. Mary Barbera: It's also a program for kids with autism and other disabilities and involves breaking tasks down systematically and using behavior analyst and apply behavior analysis to really change behavior systematically. And so, you know, there's a lot more that to ABA than just at the table. Although I'm a proponent of that too. Even for older kids because a lot of kids like Lucas, my son, who's 23 now, he learns best if we take pictures of people for instance, or take pictures of jobs that he does and the different parts. And then we just do five minutes of table time a day to target those tacs. He learns it and can generalize it to the real people. Some kids just learn differently. And so we always have to be peeling back the onion, figuring out, okay, if they're not getting a skill, what can we do to really help them learn? And that it's like we said, never too late, never too early for good ABA to be in place. So I think that's great.

Dr. Mary Barbera: So what do you see as the main struggles of autism professionals?

Dr. Kristen Colyer: Time. I mean I think, well I guess I should back that up. I think one of the major problems is getting the proper training. Having somebody you

know right now and you know, you just, it's hard to get the proper training, get enough hours that you need to do. You know, like I always look at it, people with, you know, when they go into a medical field or they have to do practicums, they have to do, you know, round and work and all the different fields and you know, all the different parts. We would have to go into pediatrics, you have to go into psychiatry. So if you're going to be a doctor, you have to kind of see the whole field, and do those practicums. And to become a BCBA, you don't, that's not a requirement. You don't have to ever work, you know, you have to get your supervision hours, but you don't have to really see the whole picture of the science. And I feel like we're not able to train our professionals as well as they should be trained.

Dr. Kristen Colyer: And then when you know, they go into different homes or places with tacs, you know, there's the time, you can't be where you need to be all the time to make sure that all the procedures are being run properly. And that way you know, the staff is doing exactly what they should be doing. So training I would say is one of the biggest problems or barriers that we have to really work with BCBAs.

Dr. Mary Barbera: Yeah, I really...I actually never thought about like medical school training. It's all structured and set up. You'll go here, you'll go there. And now in behavior analysis, it's more like you find a supervisor who's willing to supervise you. That person may not have great training or may be stuck in their ways, whatever their ways means.

Dr. Kristen Colyer: And you took that and we find somebody who like, only works with kids with autism or only works with adults with intellectual disability, or only does OBM. So the supervision that a growing BCCA is getting is kind of gets narrowed down where I just not supposed to, but you know, again, you're only as good as you know, your knowledge base. So I don't think people are getting the supervision they should be.

Dr. Kristen Colyer: So I, you know, my, I advocate for getting out there into the world and really seeing... Getting more than one supervisor and going into more than one specific, you know, a lot of growing BCBAs, you know, they work in an in home setting or they work as in a center and they get their supervision from the BCBAs that do that and then that's it. That's the only experience they have.

Dr. Kristen Colyer: A lot of BCBAs out there are teachers, which is great, but they have that experience but they don't have the other experiences. So I think it's very narrow. And I'd like to see more requirements of what experiences you

have to have when you're getting that supervision, so that we're getting better BCBA's that understand the science a little bit better.

Dr. Mary Barbera: Yeah.

Dr. Kristen Colyer: The other part is time. Time wise, it's hard. You know that, you know, there's only so many hours in a day. So yeah, professionals struggle with that... Being tired.

Dr. Mary Barbera: Yeah. So if you had five minutes with a parent of a child with autism or a brand new autism professional, what advice would you give them?

Dr. Kristen Colyer: So for a parent... My biggest advice to a parent is you are your child's most important advocate. And the best way to advocate for your child is to be knowledgeable. So I'll go back to, you know, being educated. So finding all the resources you possibly can find and educating yourself. What is autism? What is applied behavior analysis? What are all the other things that are out there and how do I fit them into my child's world to make sure that my child is being, getting the services that they need to the best of everyone's ability? I think that's so important. And I think as a parent you need to educate yourself.

New Speaker: So courses like yours where they can learn about those, the basics of what applied behavior analysis is the basics of verbal behavior: how to get your child to a table, how to reinforce appropriately, how to make sure you're pushing the right buttons and getting the compliance that we need. And then having that knowledge is super important, but then it doesn't stop. Like how do I find the right professional? How do I find a BCBA who really knows what they're doing? And I'm not just getting someone who's, you know, not doing it the way it should be done.

Dr. Kristen Colyer: So I really, really advocate for parents to educate themselves and advocate for their child as much as they possibly can. I would also say never just accept something. You know, if somebody says, a BCBA says you're going to do it this way and you're not comfortable with it, you don't have to say, okay, you should know question and say, no, I'm not happy with that. Let's figure out a different way. And you get to be the final say, not the professional. You know, you kind of, you definitely have to work together and you know, ask for explanations, but don't just accept it because that's what the person said. That would be my, those are my two pieces of advice for parents.

Dr. Mary Barbera: And what about for new professionals? Would, would the advice be the same?

Dr. Kristen Colyer: It would be never stop learning. I am amazed, you know, I've only been an actual BCBA for seven years, but I've worked in applied behavior analysis and all my jobs were ABA based for 30 years and I still learn something new every time I open a journal or talk to another professional. So you never know everything. It's a huge science, so you never know everything. And there's always another way to do something that might be a better for the specific child that you're working with or adult that you're working with. So never think you know it all. I think that's really important.

Dr. Kristen Colyer: And I would also advise people... be engrossed in the science and be engrossed in what you're doing, but also find something else to do to really release yourself from that. You know, I go home and my husband wants to talk about it more. I had this kid and that kid, I'm like, Oh, I need five minutes where we're not talking about it. Let's talk about the dog or the kids, you know. So that, cause I, and I think that's really important to understand. You need to sometimes step away from it so that you can come back in and be fresh and good at your job.

Dr. Mary Barbera: Yeah, I think that's great. So part of the podcast goals is for parents and professionals to be less stressed and lead happier lives. So, do you have any... You just said like, you know, not talk about your work or ABA constantly, but do you have any other advice in terms of how people can be less stressed, both parents and professionals?

Dr. Kristen Colyer: Finding support groups I think is really important. So for the parent, finding other parents who are going through the same thing you're going through. For staff or for BCBAs... Finding other BCBAs and talking and being friendly. Sometimes people are like, they feel like, Oh, we're in competition. And I think that we should change that mentality and like, look how much I've learned from you and other BCBAs have taught me so much. If I shut myself out of the other BCBAs, I think that would be detrimental. So finding other people that you can talk to and relate to about it helps you be less stressed in what you're doing. Like, Oh yeah, she does it that way too. Or this is someone, Oh wow. I'm not the only one that feels this way. Or Oh she's, she's overwhelmed with her caseload too. So I think that's really important to have other BCBAs in your life as your friends to kind of talk about the things that are going on, but also having people that aren't BCBAs to be your friend, too.

Dr. Kristen Colyer: You know, like I go to the gym every day. That is my one hour every day where nobody else knows what I do. And we talk about things that are totally unrelated and we have fun and we laugh and that's my stress reliever. And so finding a hobby or something that you can do is really,

really important I think. So for parents I think advocating... I mean not advocate, I'm sorry, for stress relief for a parent, having a support group, having other parents that you can kind of be with helps.

Dr. Mary Barbera: Yeah. Some of my, some of my dear friends now are autism moms that I met when Lucas was diagnosed. And so we've maintained our friendship, but I also have a lot of friends that aren't in the autism world that, you know, know Lucas, but the whole conversation is not about autism. So yeah, I think that balance, and then I do think exercises is a great one. And I know you're really big into that and that's awesome.

Dr. Kristen Colyer: I remember when I first started, when I first had children and I stopped working full time for a short period of time and the agency I work with needed somebody to help review their behavior plans. So they kept me on one day a week and I used to call that my day off cause I would, you know, everything in my life was potty training and you know, chill, go raising a child. So it was kind of nice to kind of go to go to work and not talk about those thing. So I kind of, and the reverse of that kind of thing, that's what we should do as behavior analysts or parents. Like I need to go somewhere where this isn't all I think about it. I need to go somewhere else. So that's important for your health and your just happiness.

Dr. Mary Barbera: So you now are working as a director of a center in Maryland. So people that are in Maryland or near Maryland, they could contact you. We'll put your website in the show notes or other analysts that might be interested in your dissertation research or might be wanting to know...

Dr. Kristen Colyer: Looking for a job?

Dr. Mary Barbera: When do you expect to be done with your dissertation?

Dr. Kristen Colyer: I don't know. I'd probably like three more years. I'm taking a very slow path. I'm taking one course a semester and writing my dissertation as I go. Where other people are taking two and three courses this semester. But with running the center, having children and I just, I'm taking it nice and slow.

Dr. Mary Barbera: I am excited by your, by your PhD, your dissertation topic and your continued support and participation in my online courses and my movement to really get my approach out to as many parents and professionals as possible. So I do appreciate that. If anybody's listening and wants to learn more about how you can join us,

Marybarbera.com/workshop you can attend a free workshop, and that's the pathway in to see if it's the right fit.

Dr. Mary Barbera: And I know Kristin is going to be in, in as a support for the long term too because we're both very similar in terms of our approach and that's one of the reasons I wanted to have you on to get your insight and show that behavior analysts can learn all the time how to improve. And I'm, you know, you said you learned something new every day. I learn something new every day as well. One of the things I just taught Kristen actually before we got on the line is if you have an iPhone or any kind of smart phone, there should be a podcast app button. Click on that app, go to the search, search Turn Autism Around and subscribe to the show. Leave me a five star rating and review I greatly appreciate it. And then you'll get all the shows.

Dr. Mary Barbera: I know I listen to a lot of podcasts actually, mostly online marketing conference podcast so I can learn more about how to spread the word. And I also listen to podcasts in one and a half or two times speed. So I can get through a lot more quickly when you're talking about time. So I just wanted it tell everyone who's like, I need to do that. Go over to your phone and get the podcast and get subscribed because we have a lot of great interviews coming up. And this will be one of the many great ones. So I really appreciate your time, Kristin, to come on here, spread the message and show behavior analysts that we can just continue to learn and grow.

Dr. Kristen Colyer: Well thank you so much for having me. I love it.

Dr. Mary Barbera: Yeah, we'll have to physically get together soon. I know the ABAI conference this year is going to be in DC, so I'm, I'm hoping, I'm hoping to travel down that way possibly. But we'll see. See where the wind blows. Okay. Well, thanks so much for your time and if you're listening out there, if you would hop on and give me a rating and review on the podcast, that would help me spread the word. We just celebrated, we just crossed over a hundred thousand downloads already since January of 2019 so we're in nine months, we had 100,000 downloads. Let's get that to millions more in 2020. So thanks a lot. Have a great week.

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