

More Talking Less Tantrums



10 Key Components of Effective
Autism Programming for
Any Child, *Any* Ability, *Any* Setting

Mary Lynch Barbera, PhD, RN, BCBA-D

Disclaimer

The ideas, procedures, and suggestions offered in this e-book are not intended to serve as professional advice nor as a substitute for consultation with medical and behavioral professionals.

Only a qualified professional who knows and works with a child on an ongoing basis can adequately assess and supervise a child's program to ensure meaningful progress.

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Introduction >

"What can I do to help my child now?"

"Should this student be in my classroom or is there a better school for him?"

"How do I find a great team for my child?"

"How can I improve my client's treatment plan and program?"

These are questions that I am commonly asked in my practice as a Board Certified Behavioral Analyst (BCBA). And, after seeing hundreds of children with autism and their parents, as well as training thousands of professionals over the past decade, I have created this resource to help answer those questions.

This e-book is appropriate for both parents and professionals who want to learn how to create a home program or who want concrete ways to reassess their treatment goals and plans for children with autism in any setting.

I began working with children with autism in 1999 when my son, Lucas, was diagnosed. I had some resources for developing a program, but also wanted to learn as much as I could about any and all programs that might help him improve. In 2003, I became a Board Certified Behavior Analyst and worked for the next seven years as the lead behavior analyst for the Pennsylvania Verbal Behavior

Project (now known as the PATTAN Autism ABA Initiative -- www.pattan.net). During that time I learned what worked, not only from teachers, but also from clients who continue to be my greatest source of inspiration and education.

In the past 15 years I have also earned my Masters of Science in Nursing from the University of Pennsylvania, a post-graduate certificate in Applied Behavior Analysis from Penn State University and completed a PhD in Corporate Leadership at Alvernia University.

My book, [The Verbal Behavior Approach: Teaching Children with Autism and Related Disorders](#) has sold more than 50,000 copies and has been reprinted in several other languages.

Yet before all of those credentials, I was where you may be now: frightened of the diagnosis; frantically trying to find help for my son; dedicated to learning how to improve autism programs.

Parents and caregivers often have long waits to be seen by professionals or aren't sure if the program suggested is the appropriate choice for their child. Or maybe they want to enhance what the child is learning in a school program at home. Professionals may want to learn new and simple techniques to improve progress.

Getting appropriate and effective treatment for your child with autism is key to improvement. But what, you ask, does that look like?

The short answer is that it looks like different things for different people. But the best gauge of a program is the result. If a child's challenging behaviors are diminishing and positive behaviors are increasing – you are on the right track.

This e-book will offer you not only steps you can take at home, but also a checklist that must be in place to assess any program you seek. And one that professionals should use to see if their programs are working as effectively as possible. As you'll read, you must continually reassess using these same steps, as your child is unique and constantly growing and changing.

There is a lot of work to be done, challenges to be met along the way and frustration when a program doesn't seem to be working. But there is also hope. You may have to find it in small steps and slow progress, but I have spent the last 15 years seeing that hope fulfilled in hundreds of ways.

But it all starts with the right program and ten key components.

Component > 1

Use of Effective Assessment Procedures

Accurate assessment is the first and most important component of any autism program.

Age, ability level, and setting can — and should — be considered, but assessment is key to effective programming. You need to know where you are, to help you see where you're going.

Language abilities and skills should be assessed first to determine whether and to what extent those skills will need to be increased. Any effective assessment will also need to be used to recognize deficits, potential reinforcers, what problem behaviors look like and the function of those problem behaviors.

It is important to note that, in addition to assessing language and learning skills as well as problem behaviors, I also recommend assessing allergies, what medications children take, how they are sleeping and eating, and their toileting skills.

Professionals who are skilled in one specific area do not always assess the most basic behaviors such as whether the child is wearing diapers or pull-ups, how a child is sleeping, and whether he or she is still taking a bottle or [addicted to a pacifier](#). Make sure that those aspects are included to give a complete picture of your child.

In my article, [Getting Started with the Verbal Behavior Approach](#), I included a [one-page assessment](#) that I developed to help me assess any child's strengths and needs. It includes asking about allergies, medications, sleep, toileting, how many words they're using, and if they can fill in the blanks to songs. This [one-page assessment](#) (which is now in a downloadable and fillable PDF) is helpful for practitioners as well as those who are beginning to work with a child or an adult so that they can gain a better understanding of the child's levels in a variety of areas.

While that assessment is a starting point, it is important to recognize that this one-page form is not a *full* assessment, but rather, a mini assessment. For a full assessment I recommend the VB-MAPP Assessment written by Dr. Mark Sundberg in 2008, almost exclusively. Once I have completed the one-page mini assessment, then I focus on the VB-MAPP Assessment, which can be accessed electronically at www.vbmappapp.com.



Equally important to language assessment, professionals should be encouraged to analyze the problem behaviors that the child demonstrates.

It is important to determine what the problem behavior looks like, the rate at which the behavior of concern occurs, and what consequences have been used. Once this is documented, discussions should occur with parents and teachers regarding when the child displays these problem behaviors, as well as when the child does not typically display the problem behaviors. This might help to determine why the problem behavior is occurring.

Each child or adult is different so assessment is an important first step before any treatment can be put into place.

That first assessment is important, but it should not be the last. Re-assess all areas on a regular basis to ensure that progress is continuing, and especially if a sudden change or inconsistent progress is noted in one or more areas.

Component > 2

Find Appropriate Materials & Reinforcers

There are several standard materials that should be accessible in any learning area, regardless of the child's age or ability. If you are creating your own program, make sure you have these items and if you're a professional working in the client's home, these should be available to start a program.



- 1. Table with chairs for the therapist and the child.** For older children working within a home program, I usually recommend that the parent obtain a card table and folding chairs. For a toddler or

pre-schooler, a child-sized table and chairs is probably best. After years of sitting at very small tables, however, I now recommend that adults working with small children, should sit on a sofa or adult-sized chair during the session, while the young child sits at the small table and little chair. This is often much more comfortable for the adult than sitting in a child-sized chair or sitting on the floor. I also recommend that the small table be moved in front of a television and next to the sofa or adult-sized chair at the beginning of the session to signify that learning time has begun. Schools can also use tables or desks pushed together so that the adult is sitting across from the child.

- 2. Two identical sets of first word flash cards** (Dollar Store or other inexpensive packs are fine to get started). Two sets will enable you to have two pictures of each item. For example, you'll have an identical apple in each set and a shoe in each set. Believe it or not, this minimal investment will give you resources to get started on any program. You may need to edit the cards a bit. For instance if the pictures have an apple and they also have the letter *A* on them, you may want to remove the letter, because a lot of our children will focus only on the letter. In the beginning of a program I believe this

can confuse a child. As your program continues, the addition of the letter to the word will be a separate assessment and teaching tool.

- 3. Make sure that everyone working with the child (schools, caregivers, professionals) gets two pictures of important people and reinforcing items.** For instance, tutors or teachers will need two pictures of an iPad, two pictures of juice, two pictures of fruit snacks, two pictures of mom and dad (individual pictures). This is a simple but effective way to work on skills such as matching and pairing words with important items.
- 4. Cause and effect can be taught to a younger child (or an older student without speech) using a shoebox.** Cut a slit in the top of the box (any box with a lid would work) and then, work on pairing the word "apple" with the picture of an apple, you give the card to the child and he or she can put it in the box. You can also hold that picture of the apple right up to your mouth as this encourages the child to look at your face and really engage with you while you model how the words are made. Use pictures of reinforcing items and people to pair these words as the child puts each picture in the box after hearing the word three times.
- 5. Reinforcers are essential.** Edibles, drinks, electronics, and toys are all potential reinforcers. The best kinds of reinforcers are toys or

items, which have lots of parts or are consumable. When most people hear “consumable” they think of a food item but some other things such as bubbles or a short YouTube clip that disappears after a brief period are also “consumable.” These types of reinforcers make it easy to pair a word or give an instruction between reinforcers. Things with small parts, such as Mr. Potato Head, can also be great reinforcers since the child will build the reinforcer as he or she goes along, and language can be developed. Inset puzzles are also a great tool to develop language. A favorite large toy without parts isn’t that great of a reinforcer to use in early programming because if you hand the child a toy car, for example, as a reinforcer, you will need to take the toy car back to give the next instruction. It is so important that you as the adult are seen as the “giver” and not the “taker” so keep this in mind when planning what to use as reinforcers. For this reason, especially early on in the program, try to use items that are consumed naturally or toys with lots of parts that the child finds reinforcing!

Component > 3

Prioritize & Plan

Any goals — Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals, work goals, or behavior goals — should be based on an individualized assessment of the child. Targets that are taught should be reinforcers first. This is why the two pictures of fruit snacks and the two pictures of the iPad that I mentioned earlier are so effective. A child is going to pay attention to those pictures first. They might first learn the sign and then the next step is to associate a label with it.

The Big Three

The [“Big Three”](#) are the top three things that I believe any child or adult needs in order to be independent, happy, and included as much as possible in natural situations:

1. Major problem behavior occurrences at or near zero
2. The ability to request wants and needs to unfamiliar adults
3. Independent toileting

If any of these three skills are missing or lacking in children over 4 or 5 years of age, then the families of these individuals may have a difficult time finding babysitters or respite providers and may not be able to take the child to public places like restaurants, on airplanes, and to swimming pools. In addition, the child may not be included at school or in the community to the maximum extent possible. Everyday tasks might also be seriously curtailed.

These three fundamental tasks (major problem behaviors very low, the ability to request, and toileting) should be the top priorities of any program.

All school and autism programs should really focus on these three aspects. If the child that you're working with does not have one or all of these components in place, question their IEP goals for each of these three areas. There is no point working on addition or number identification, or even labeling, if the child does not have these three essential skills in place or in progress. There may be some children, especially those with complex medical conditions who may not be able to master independent toileting or may not be able to learn to request, even with a simple picture system or with sign language. But for the vast majority of children with autism, the "Big Three" are important and attainable goals.

In addition to working on reducing major problem behaviors, increasing requesting, and independent toileting, other goals, programs, and targets should be written based on the child's VB-MAPP and/or other assessments. The key here is to work on basic skills first and make sure pre-requisites are in place *before* working on more complex skills.

Component > 4

Optimize the Environment for Learning

The environment in which you teach a child with autism is as important as what you are teaching.

If you're in a classroom or even in the family room of your home, it is likely that the child's toys and fun items will be lying around the room. Whenever possible remove free access to reinforcers in the room where you will be teaching the child the majority of the time. We use the term '*sanitize*' to describe limiting items, which will draw the child's attention away from the learning area.

If the room is not cleared of free access to reinforcement, it is quite likely that the child will leave the work area and move towards squishy balls, blocks, toy cars, electronics or other items the child finds reinforcing.

Sanitizing the entire environment will ensure that all learning tools and reinforcers are within your control.

Also make sure to keep reinforcers and work materials organized and closed in large zip-lock bags. Children will move things around and it's likely that the ABC puzzle you didn't store properly will be in pieces throughout the work area. Always make sure that when you are finished working with that puzzle, you put all the ABC letters into a zip-lock bag and keep that with the puzzle. This serves the dual purpose of organizing your work items and also ensuring that the child doesn't have free access to reinforcers.

I cannot stress enough the importance of getting your teaching materials organized in bins and zip-lock bags. When it's "time to work" you want your tools to be easily accessible and the room ready for learning.

Incidentally, I rarely use the word "work" when speaking to children because many learners hear it as a negative. Instead, use "learning time," or tell the child "it's time to come and play at the table." If the student is resisting that learning area, check the room again for free reinforcement, and do your best to sanitize the environment so that all the good things are only at the learning table.

However, since learning occurs in a variety of places including every room of the house, in school, and also in the community, try to gain instructional control in the most controlled settings first, and then use these components across environments.

As a teacher or parent you will likely see problem behaviors in different learning environments, regardless of age or ability. The presence of problem behaviors usually means the demands are too high and/or the reinforcement is too low.

What can we do about that? You can use a little visualization to come to that answer.

What if I gave you \$1,000 to ensure that your child or student has a great day with little or no problem behavior? What would you do? Answers to questions such as this are outlined more specifically in chapter 2 of my book, *The Verbal Behavior Approach*.

But take a moment to think about it now. If I offered you \$1,000 – how would you plan for your child or student to have a great day with no problem behaviors?

This question forces caregivers and teachers to think about what it would take to help the child behave. When does he or she exhibit appropriate behavior (being calm, not hitting, not exhibiting some kind of problem behavior)? It is a likely answer that, with this \$1,000 offers at stake, you would create a day that is totally reinforcing, where the student would participate in fun activities with little to no demands.

For example, if the child likes to watch the same movie over and over, you would let them do that all day long. If the child likes candy, you would have an abundance of candy. Whatever the child likes to do, he or she would be given a very dense schedule of reinforcement with very few demands.

But how realistic is that? More than you might think.

As a teacher it would be difficult for you to encourage an abundance of candy, but you can use that tool – the knowledge that you know it would work – to find the parts in your day when the “go-to” reinforcer will work. Re-examine the parts of the day when the child is successful and *not* having problem behavior.

You can also think about the times of the day when they do present difficulties. So does the child have to go to circle time? Does the child have to go to math inclusion if that's the problem? Identify problem areas and make sure that high reinforcement is occurring throughout the day, but especially during events that are likely to trigger problems.

'Pairing' can facilitate that. Chapter four of *The Verbal Behavior Approach* gives lots of good examples of pairing, but component 5 will give you something with which to start.

Component > 5

Pair Yourself with All Good Things

There are as many reasons that children won't or can't comply with a demand, as there are children. But one reason for escape behaviors is that the task you've laid out is simply too demanding.

To prevent escape behaviors – or really any negative behavior —make sure your programs and targets are based on the student's individualized assessment and incrementally increase the demands you place on the student.

The technical term for this is *Stimulus Demand Fading*, but it's really just gradually making things a little more difficult while fading the reinforcement slightly too.

For example, the first few times you work with a student, just label things and don't ask a lot of questions, even if the child is very verbal. Find out what they like to do and, if they can speak, find out the things they like to talk about. Find opportunities to reinforce them without placing any clear demands. So if you blow bubbles and they start popping the bubbles, say something like “*pop, pop, pop*” for an early learner, or “*great job at popping*”

that big bubble" for a child with more advanced language abilities. The goal is that *you* become the reinforcer and that every activity is more fun with you than without you. This is the process of pairing.

While pairing is especially important when you first start working with a child, it is not a once-and-done strategy. You may have to "re-pair" some materials or even re-pair yourself after a long weekend, for example.

In general, adults need to focus more on being givers not takers. Focus on constantly giving little bits of things, whether that is puzzle pieces or bubbles or edibles or short clips of a video or a television show. Pairing sessions at the table can begin by giving the child pieces of those edibles and short clips of a movie. As you give, you want to label the item slowly, with an animated and emphasized tone.

For example, if you have an inset puzzle with animals that is a favorite of the child, you should say "*pig, pig, pig*" as you slowly move the puzzle piece away from your mouth and toward the child. If they are reaching for the pig then you know the child has some motivation to put the pig in the puzzle. With strong motivation, you can sometimes hold out by giving 4 or 5 pairings of the word "pig" before handing it to the child. This sometimes leads to

more vocalization and requests. However, don't push this too early or too far, as the child's behavior could quickly deteriorate and your pairing session can turn sour.

It is important to gauge when to give in, so that the demand is not too high but that the child is still eager to play and learn. Once they do start to reach for the items, you are going to want to repeat those item names and encourage them to request the items by name.

As the pairing succeeds, you'll eventually grow out of a pairing session and into a "requesting" session, which will be the centerpiece of the child's program.

Requesting or mand sessions require that when a child wants something, he or she has established his or her own motivation; can ask for it in some way; and will receive the item or activity.

Component > 6

Be Positive!

The late Glen Latham, author of *Positive Parenting* and [*Behind the School House Doors: Eight Skills Every Teacher Needs*](#), advocated for eight positives for every negative comment or correction for all humans.

His research showed that students with disabilities typically receive many more negatives than positives. He suggested that turning that ratio around would help students to learn; no one learns in an environment of failure.

An environment that is positive will result in more progress than an environment that is negative.

You want the child to be excited when the tutor arrives or when the learning table is moved in front of the TV to indicate therapy is about to begin. If your student protests going to school, going to the learning table, or completing a self-help skill (such as dressing or bathing) or even just resists being with you, it is a sign that components 1-5 may not be in place.

Again, assessment is key to the success of any program and pairing yourself as the giver of all good things is essential to getting work from a student.

Those components become more important as the child grows and self-help skills take on a greater importance. You will need to remain very positive but also will need to get compliance in areas away from the learning table since the child needs to become more independent with things like showering and tying shoes.

If you suspect that the positive to negative ratio might be a factor in your client's behavior problems, you might want to spend 15 minutes or even an hour tallying positive comments or gestures versus negative ones. If a paraprofessional or tutor says "*Johnny stop that,*" "*remember sit correctly,*" or "*no chewing,*" these would all go into the negative pile. A thumbs up, "*good writing your name,*" or "*awesome*" would be in the positive pile. Sometimes with spot checks and feedback given to the adults, the 8:1 positive to negative ratio can be reached and the child's problem behaviors greatly reduced.

Encouragement instead of constant corrections will help a child learn at all stages.

Component > 7

Limit Difficult Demands

During the assessment, it is important to determine what skills and specific targets are mastered.

While it might be helpful to know that a student can touch five body parts, for example, you also need to determine what specific body parts he or she knows before you can teach the other body parts. You also need to determine if they can touch these body parts with no imitation prompt and also whether they can label the body part when asked "*what's this called?*" while the instructor is touching her nose or other body part.

It's always a good idea to not only keep track of the milestones the child has met, but also differentiate which specific skills they have mastered. Without these known mastered skills, we're unable to create a known box, which is very important.

Use 80 percent easy items during intensive teaching to keep the learning positive and enjoyable so the student feels successful. If you don't know what the student knows, it's going to be really hard to teach in any organized fashion.

So again, you may need to assess frequently as the child learns. You may use index cards to specifically write out the different targets that the child has mastered to keep you organized. On 3"x5" index cards, you will want to write skills such as "*touch your nose,*" "*what's this called (hair),*" "*what flies in the sky?*" "*say banana,*" and "*do this (clap hands).*" These index cards as well as pictures the child can label or receptively identify will go in the known box (a plastic recipe box or larger plastic box with a lid). These cards serve as prompts to the tutor or teacher so mastered skills are reviewed often and known items are interspersed with more difficult skills.

Once you have determined what the child knows, you can focus on giving easy demands that are easy to prompt both in and outside the formal table time. For instance, a non-vocal child should not be encouraged to *say* "bye," but that child can be prompted to *wave* "bye."

Finally, only give demands that you are willing to follow through on, as you will need to require compliance so as not to reinforce an escape behavior.

Component > 8

Teach Errorlessly

Errorless teaching means that the child should not make a mistake.

With errorless learning, the teacher delivers the instruction with prompts to ensure the success of the learner and allow more opportunities for the learner to contact reinforcement. By teaching errorlessly, the student is less likely to exhibit escape or avoidant behaviors that get in the way of learning. This occurs because he or she is able to contact reinforcement more frequently.

No one likes to “do” something they are going to “do” wrong. This is the same concept with our learners. By giving our students all the opportunities to be right they will want to continue learning because contact with reinforcement is more frequent.

Here are the steps to using errorless teaching:

1. On the first trial, present the student with a full prompt then reinforce the response.
2. As your learner shows increased confidence in performing the task more independently, start fading your prompt from more intrusive to less intrusive.
3. Using transfer trials will help you avoid having your student become prompt dependent. A transfer trial follows a prompted trial to give the child another chance to complete the same skill without an immediate prompt. Find more about transfer trials in Chapter 7 of my book and/or in a 2005 article, [*Using Transfer Procedures to Teach Tacts to a Child with Autism*](#), published by Dr. Rick Kubina (my BCBA mentor from Penn State University) and me in the *Analysis of Verbal Behavior*.

Component > 9

Be Consistent & Calm

Learning to deal with problem behaviors calmly and effectively is a skill that is invaluable in dealing with any child.

First, be calm and matter-of-fact when the student is displaying problem behaviors. One of the worst things you can do is to show that you are visibly upset yourself, or to label the problem behavior.

Do not yell or use physical force to gain compliance. Whenever possible, use a “hands off” procedure; if you have successfully paired yourself with “good things” students will want to come to you. And since you have learned to ease into demands gradually, it’s likely you are not going to have to use any kind of physical force or even physical prompting to stop the negative behavior.

Keep in mind, though, that safety is always first, and if you sense that a student is preparing to hit another student, or getting ready to throw a chair through the window, or do something else that is unsafe, you need to be prepared to keep the child safe in whatever way you can.

Remember that you are the calm adult in the situation, but children learn from everything you do. Do not label problem behaviors. Do not attempt to negotiate or reason with a child who is in the middle of a problem behavior; and do not attempt to resolve the problem while the child is crying.

First, calm and quiet the child down. Students really need to learn the concept of appropriateness: in other words, “when I ask appropriately, good things happen” however “when I exhibit a problem behavior, reinforcement does not occur.”

The best way to accomplish this is to not allow the child access to reinforcement during an episode of problem behavior. If a child has a tantrum because you will not give him or her a chip, do NOT give the chip, even if it seems as though that would be the easier choice to stop the behavior. It reinforces the tantrum.

And again, I cannot stress highly enough that you remain calm during an episode. Your behavior should not be reactive. If we, as the professional or parent, model the appropriate behaviors, the child becomes more familiar with what appropriateness looks and feels like, thus becoming more actively

engaged in an enjoyable and pleasant learning environment, allowing for more progress.

An easy way to see if you're doing a good job is to keep track of the problem behaviors. If they go down, you are succeeding. If they remain the same or increase, you need to reassess the student's abilities or the program.

Chapter 2 of my book ([The Verbal Behavior Approach](#)) goes into more detail about functions of behavior and analyzing problem behaviors by looking at what happens right before the problem behavior (Antecedent), what the behavior of concern looks like, and what you or someone else did right after the problem behavior (Consequence).

Component



Make Data Based Decisions

Taking data is essential to ensure maximum progress.

Whether you are keeping track of new words you hear, the rate of hitting, the number of times the child has urinated in the toilet, or the number of times the child has made a request in an hour, those data provides a foundation for moving forward. I know it's difficult for parents to keep track of this, but taking some data is essential to noting progress and gauging the success of the program.

Ideally, data should be graphed and analyzed on a daily or at least a weekly basis. But, if you are taking a lot of data that is not to be graphed or analyzed regularly, you may be wasting your time. Make sure you are keeping track of both the goals for your child and how they are doing with programs and targets. Tracking, although difficult for some parents, is the best way to see how your child is succeeding and learning.

My advice to both professionals and parents alike is that we really need to get back to the basics of planning and prioritizing. What data are we going to

take? How is that going to be graphed and analyzed? What are we going to do with it?

Every couple of weeks, you may find that you were collecting data on one behavior in particular, but after critical evaluation, that behavior doesn't seem to be a problem anymore. In that situation, switch gears and try to take down the data in a different way, or on a different behavior, such as for those pro-social behaviors that you want to increase, or those problem behaviors that you want to decrease.

I encourage anyone who doesn't feel like they are making good data based decisions to revisit the earlier components; determine what data should be collected, and how that data might be analyzed best.

Summary



The ten key components outlined in this e-book are what I believe are needed for an effective autism program for any child regardless of a child's age, ability level, or the setting involved.

These 10 components are:

1. Use effective assessment procedures
2. Obtain materials and reinforcers
3. Prioritize and plan
4. Optimize the environment for learning
5. Pair yourself with good things
6. Be positive!
7. Limit difficult demands
8. Teach errorlessly
9. Be consistent and calm
10. Make data-based decisions

In summary, the two most important things to remember when planning or assessing a program:

1. Different strategies work for different clients but all programs and strategies should be based on the science of Applied Behavior Analysis.
2. Progress is the only indicator of success

That might sound over simplified, but at its core, every autism program will work if the facilitator is aware and willing to tweak or even reinvent the program using the ten key components as necessary.

Every child will have reinforcers those will increase language and learning skills and every child can progress. Assessing, re-assessing and a willingness to vary a program that isn't getting the progress you desire are the essential ingredients for an effective autism program.

Remember, too, that you are not alone and that thousands of children have benefited from these tools. Yours can, too.

About Mary >

Mary Lynch Barbera, PhD, RN, BCBA-D offers a unique perspective as a parent of a son with autism, a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) and author. In 2007 she published [*The Verbal Behavior Approach: How to Teach*](#)



[*Children with Autism and Related Disorders*](#) (now available in several languages) and completed a Ph.D. in Leadership in 2011. Over the past decade, Mary has worked with hundreds of children on the autism spectrum and has assisted in providing training to thousands of professionals and parents around the world. For more information about Mary, go to www.MaryBarbera.com.