

Teaching tool

Mary Lynch Barbera of Wyomissing, the mother of a child with autism, hopes her new book will be a practical guide for parents and professionals about how to teach language and other skills to children with autism as well as other difficulties.

By Susan Shelly
Reading Eagle Correspondent

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Wyomissing, PA - Mary Lynch Barbera knows first-hand the challenges and trials of teaching a child with autism how to navigate the world.

Barbera's older son, Lucas L., was diagnosed with autism in 1999 — a diagnosis that rocked her world and changed her life. Once Lucas was diagnosed, however, Barbera, an experienced registered nurse, claimed ownership of the situation. From that point on, she was not only Lucas' mom, but his advocate and teacher, as well.

Barbera of Wyomissing, along with Tracy Rasmussen, an author and journalist who is a correspondent for the Reading Eagle, recently wrote a book about teaching children with autism. Titled "The Verbal Behavior Approach: How to Teach Children With Autism and Related Disorders," the book is a practical guide for parents and professionals about how to teach language and other skills to children with developmental disabilities. Although it was written primarily with children with autism in mind, the information easily can be applied to those with other difficulties.

"I knew that there was no book out there that comprehensively covered the material that my book does," Barbera said. "I'm hopeful that this book will serve as a guide and source of help to many families and teachers of children with autism."

Published this spring by Jessica Kingsley Publishers of London and Philadelphia, the book has received excellent reviews in publications such as the *Journal of Early and Intensive Behavior Intervention* and the *International Journal of Behavioral Consultation and Therapy*.

Reaching milestones

Lucas was born in 1996 and developed typically during his first year. His mother and father, Dr. Charles F. Barbera, chairman of the department of emergency medicine at Reading Hospital, watched proudly as Lucas progressed through the milestones of the first year of life.

In hindsight, Mary Barbera said, Lucas began regressing at about 15 months.

"He was changing subtly," she said. "We had Spencer (their second son, now 9) by then, and Lucas was pretty much oblivious to the baby. There were other things, too, but it was hard to put your finger on. He just didn't seem to get it."

When Lucas was 18 months old, Barbera expressed her concerns to a pediatrician. When he was 21 months old, her husband first mentioned the possibility that Lucas had autism.

"I was completely bewildered," Barbera said. "I told my husband I never wanted to hear that word out of his mouth again. And, being a good husband, he didn't mention it again for a year."

At that point, however, it was impossible to ignore that Lucas was falling far behind developmentally.

He was diagnosed as having regressive autism the day before his third birthday. Lucas, as is typical of children with regressive autism, had normal development during the first year, but then began to exhibit difficulties.



Reading Eagle: Jeremy Drey

Mary Lynch Barbera and her son, Lucas L., 11, of Wyomissing spend time together at home.

Children with this type of autism often have difficulty with language, cognitive and social skills. Lucas, a lively, loving, dark-haired boy, is typical in his struggle with speaking.

"For Lucas, autism manifests itself with a severe language impairment," Barbera said.

Learning everything

Once Barbera accepted the fact that Lucas had autism, she got busy learning everything she could about how to deal with it.

"For me, the best way to be able to help Lucas and others was to educate myself," she said.

She attended conferences and read every book she could find. In 2000, she became the founding president of the Autism Society of Berks County, and in 2003 she became a board certified behavior analyst and began working with children with autism and their families.

She is the lead behavior analyst for the Pennsylvania Verbal Behavior Project, which analyzes the effectiveness of verbal behavior techniques in schools throughout the state.

Barbera has become known as an authority on the verbal behavior approach to learning, which is based on the research of B.F. Skinner, a highly influential psychologist and behavioral scientist. Her book provides a step-by-step guide of how to teach children with limited language skills and also addresses issues such as behavior problems, using sign language and helping children learn tasks of daily living.

Finishing the book is a milestone for Barbera, who hopes it will help prepare more people to work with and teach children with autism.

"Very few people in the past have been trained to work with children with autism, and yet we're seeing more and more autism all the time," Barbera said. "I'm hopeful that the book will allow many people to get started quickly in using the verbal behavior approach. I'm hopeful that it will help."

•Contact correspondent Susan Shelly at lifestyle@readingeagle.com.

About the author

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Wyomissing, PA - •Mary Lynch Barbera lives in Wyomissing with her husband, Dr. Charles F. Barbera, chairman of the department of emergency medicine at Reading Hospital; and her sons, Lucas L., 11; and Spencer C., 9. Lucas was diagnosed with regressive autism in 1999, the day before his third birthday.

•Barbera is a registered nurse, a board certified behavior analyst and the lead behavior analyst for the Pennsylvania Verbal Behavior Approach Project, which studies the effectiveness of verbal behavior techniques in classrooms throughout Pennsylvania.

•A graduate of Central Catholic High School, Barbera has a bachelor's degree from West Chester University and a master's degree in nursing from the University of Pennsylvania. She is pursuing a doctorate degree from Alvernia College.

About the Autism Society of Berks County

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Wyomissing, PA - The Autism Society of Berks County is a registered chapter of the Autism Society of America. The all-volunteer organization does not operate out of an office, but representatives can be reached by phone at 610-736-3739; by writing to the Autism Society of Berks, P.O. Box 6683, Wyomissing, PA 19610; or by emailing info@autismsocietyofberks.org. You can learn more about the organization at www.autismsocietyofberks.org.

The group was founded in 2000 by five mothers of children with autism. One of those mothers was the group's founding president, Mary Mary Lynch Barbera, author of a recently published book called "The Verbal Behavior Approach: How to Teach Children With Autism and Related Disorders."

The Autism Society of Berks County, which includes family members and friends of children with autism as well as professionals, sponsors educational programs, conferences, workshops and speakers; events for families; and other activities to help support and educate those affected by autism. It also sponsors an annual walk to help increase awareness of autism and raise money for research and other activities.

Its next meeting will be held Monday, Aug. 13, at 7 p.m. at the Jewish Community Center, 1700 City Line St. Baby-sitting services are available.

About the book

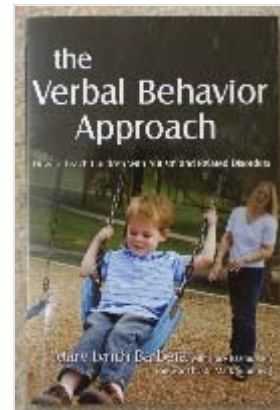
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- "The Verbal Behavior Approach: How to Teach Children With Autism and Related Disorders" was written by Mary Lynch Barbera of Wyomissing, with Tracy Rasmussen, an author and journalist who is a Reading Eagle correspondent.

The verbal behavior approach is based on the research of B.F. Skinner, a psychologist who in 1957 wrote a book called "Verbal Behavior." The book is a guide to help parents and professionals teach children with autism, including a glossary, a verbal behavior assessment form, skills tracking sheets, a list of related Web sites and helpful reading material and other resources.

Published in May, 2007 by Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia, the book can be ordered from Amazon (www.amazon.com), Barnes & Noble (www.bn.com), from the publisher (www.jkp.com) or from Different Roads to Learning (www.difflearn.com). It also is available locally at Barnes & Noble in Spring Township and is expected to soon be in stock at Borders' Books and Music in Wyomissing.

For more information about the book or the verbal behavior approach, see Barbera's Web site at www.vbapproach.com. She can be contacted through the site with questions or for more information.



Reading Eagle: Jeremy Drey

Mary Lynch Barbera hopes new book will serve as a guide to families and teachers of children with autism. Lucas was diagnosed with autism in 1999.