

Dr Zwicker Testimony In Opposition to Raised Bill 1105

I am the parent of a 5-year old with autism and I have a doctorate in applied behavior analysis and I am writing to oppose Raised Bill 1105. I left a career traveling as a highly paid executive coach to Fortune 50 leaders to return to Connecticut so I could oversee my son's treatment more closely and to help other children with autism by using my skills as a doctoral level BCBA in schools and homes throughout New Haven County providing ABA services. Raised Bill 1105 reverses the law, originally titled HB5425, that the legislature passed last year. That law is scheduled to go into effect in 2012. Raised Bill 1105 enables just about anyone certified by the Department of Education or Health to supervise ABA services. However, only those who get extensive training in the principles and practices of applied behavior analysis should be supervising such services for my son or any child with autism where the IEP calls for ABA services. People who do not have the proper training cannot ensure ABA services are safe, effective, or ethical. There is extremely high risk of harm both physical and psychological to children with autism and regression in their progress if ABA services are not done right.

As I testified last year before distinguished members of this committee, when my son entered preschool, he had never eaten solid food, had no language at all, and spent most of his day spinning wheels on toy cars and trucks, and had made no developmental progress since infancy. The special education teachers and director, a speech pathologist, at his preschool told me that they had the expertise needed and an entire room in the school for my son that was run using the principles and practices of applied behavior analysis. What my son got at preschool was an ABA environment that was what they knew how to offer, not anything close to what a trained behavior analyst would create to ensure effective treatment. When I asked what training the teachers in the room had in ABA and how many behavior analysts they had working in the program, they indicated that they received 4 hours of consultation a week at the school from a board certified behavior analyst and that the teacher in the room and director had taken a few classes in their school that described ABA procedures and methods and had some workshops on ABA and working with children with autism. They assured me and Caleb's mother that they had decades of experience and all the right expertise. Their cute anecdotes about Caleb and apparent expertise convinced Caleb's mother, a Yale researcher, that they were doing the right things. They were so happy to report that he had started wearing his backpack down the hall and putting it on a peg when he got to the classroom in one of his PPT meetings. However, they were not addressing his two most serious deficits: he had never eaten solid food in his life and was medically fragile because of it, and had not spoken a word in his first three years of life. Thus, their training did not help them to target

the most critical skills and behavioral deficits that any trained behavior analyst would target first – speaking and eating solid food! They had no data that a supervising behavior analyst would ensure were collected and they did not make decisions about treatment effectiveness using any objective data that again, any trained behavior analyst would ensure were collected and used for all programming decision-making. While they sat around talking about him putting his backpack on a peg after a lot of work on it, I had to remind them that he had still never spoken a word in his life and had also still never eaten a solid bite of food.

While I was traveling each week during those very frustrating, agonizing months when I realized that my hopes for a good ABA program were unfounded, I found and paid out of pocket for a BCBA from ACES to work in the evenings and on weekends with Caleb. After just two weeks of ABA therapy for just 10 hours a week targeting eating and speaking, my son was speaking dozens of words to get things (mands) and he was eating yogurt from a spoon right out of the container. In almost two years of state-paid Birth to Three services and almost 3 months at school in what they called an ABA therapy program, they had not made ANY progress on either of those goals. As you can see, when you get the right people with the right training in ABA to supervise programs, you get real progress with children with autism.

It took months and many arguments and discussion of due process when my son finally got a BCBA for his school program. The BCBA was there every other day for the entire day and directly observed therapy and provided frequent feedback to the ABA trainers they trained to provide it, changed programs daily if needed, and even tried new programs out personally before putting them in place. In fact, my son still has the same BCBA two years later. He made so much progress that he has gone from not speaking or eating to performing at the same level as his typical peers academically in his typical kindergarten classroom. He still requires ABA therapy with a 1:1 ABA trainer helping to guide him to attend to the regular teacher so they can eventually fade the ABA program supports entirely. The skills he works on now are complex and my son is making progress at such a high rate that if he continues on his current trajectory, he will move him off, that's right, off the autism spectrum in the next few years. To highlight how significant that is for those of you unfamiliar with what early intensive ABA therapy can accomplish, I'd like to refer you to recent research published by Dr Deborah Fein of UCONN, who by the way is not a Behavior Analyst. Her findings from following groups of children diagnosed with autism over years indicate that up to 20% of children with autism move off the autism spectrum with intensive early ABA intervention.

My son still has behavioral issues such as aggression towards his peers on occasion and I would not trust anyone other than a BCBA to effectively, safely, and ethically address that. Working with children with autism is complex and requires more than a few workshops and some courses in ABA to understand how to translate research into practice and how to use behavioral procedures and methods to teach critical skills and ameliorate serious aberrant behaviors. I certainly hope I didn't waste my time to get a doctorate in a field if someone can just as easily attend some workshops and read some articles and then create and supervise ABA programs and make decisions about procedures to create the same results that I can create. My personal experience with my son's school team, his incredible progress since a BCBA took over his program, and all my expertise in applied behavior analysis research and practice over 20 years tell me that reversing the law passed last year will not benefit any child with autism and will most certainly lead to physical and psychological harm for Connecticut's children with autism.

I am here on Caleb's behalf to make sure that all Connecticut children with autism have the same quality ABA services when called for in their IEPs, supervised by credentialed people with the right training – BCBA's or psychologists who have ABA within their scope of practice because they received the same extensive training. Parents of children with autism should not have to have a parent with a Ph.D. in applied behavior analysis to check on the team providing ABA services at school to make sure that they are delivering the services correctly, that they are not harming their child by incorrectly applying procedures, and that his child is making the right progress. The schools need clear direction which has been provided in the law passed last year (initially HB5425) that BCBA's or those with the same training and ABA in their scope of practice must supervise ABA services in schools for children with autism when called for in their IEPs. We must protect our children and ensure that ABA procedures and methods are done the right way with the right outcomes. My son is not an uncommon example of just how far those outcomes extend when a BCBA supervises early intensive ABA services.

Thank you for your listening. I urge you to join with me in opposing Raised Bill 1105 on behalf of my son Caleb and the more than four thousand children with autism in Connecticut schools.

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