



Recommendations Regarding Use of the Term “Ignore” in Applied Behavior Analysis

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Abstract

Ignore is a common term used in behavioral assessment, behavior intervention plans, textbooks, and research articles. In the present article, we recommend against the typical usage of the term in most applications of behavior analysis. First, we briefly outline some history of the use of the term in behavior analysis. Then, we describe six main concerns about *ignore* and the implications for its continued use. Finally, we address each of these concerns with proposed solutions, such as alternatives to the use of *ignore*.

Keywords Behavior assessment · Behavior intervention plans · Ignore · Planned ignoring

In this article, we recommend against the typical use of the term *ignore* in most applications of behavior analysis, including but not limited to behavioral assessments, behavior intervention plans, textbooks, and research articles. We realize that the use of *ignore* is common in behavior analysis (in fact, there is a commonly known procedure called “planned ignoring”), and many of us in the field (including the authors on this article) have used the term historically and regularly. However, it has become clear to us that there are significant actual or potential concerns with its continued usage. These concerns include (1) it is dangerous to ignore some behavior; (2) it is nearly impossible to ignore some behavior, so giving such an instruction

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is to knowingly give an instruction that often cannot be implemented; (3) ignoring might be functionally irrelevant in some cases and may lead to a failure to identify root causes of behavior; (4) some people (e.g., consumers) are uncomfortable with the instruction to ignore behavior, and we should be attending to the social validity of our recommendations; (5) the term is often used in an imprecise way; and (6) suggestions to ignore behavior that are clinically used in caregiver and staff training and may lead to unwanted generalization of usage. This article aims to outline these concerns and to propose potential solutions and alternatives to the use of *ignore*.

History of *Ignore* in Behavior Analysis

In the context of behavioral interventions, *ignore* is typically used to indicate that no programmed consequences should be delivered following the occurrence of the target behavior (e.g., “ignore occurrences of hitting”). This use appeared in the first issue of the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* (JABA; Zeilberger et al., 1968), in the most cited empirical article in JABA (Iwata et al., 1994a), and in many other studies, including studies by a subset of us (the authors of this article). A brief search, conducted by searching for the appearance of the word *ignore* over the past 5 years in our flagship journal, the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, yielded 128 articles. Although a complete review of all articles that have used the term is outside of the scope of the purpose of this article, we found it informative to consider circumstances in which it was most commonly used, which include: (1) to describe a functional analysis condition (e.g., Falligant et al., 2021; Gerow et al., 2021; Sloman et al., 2022); (2) as an interchangeable term with extinction (e.g., Dowdy et al., 2021; Fisher et al., 2020; Mitteer et al., 2018; Tsami et al., 2019); (3) when describing a component of differential reinforcement (e.g., Edelman et al., 2021; Green et al., 2018; Wathen & Podlesnik, 2018); (4) in school programming (e.g., Foley et al., 2019; Green et al., 2018; Perle, 2018); and (5) when training caregivers on behavior reduction and skill acquisition strategies (e.g., Fisher et al., 2020; Lindgren et al., 2020; Mitteer et al., 2018; Tsami et al., 2019), among other uses. *Ignore* is so ubiquitous that even “planned ignoring” is the name of a commonly used procedure to describe a specific reaction to a target response (e.g., France & Hudson, 1990).

Likewise, *ignore* is commonly used in textbooks. Its use includes: (1) equating *ignore* with another term, like “extinction” (e.g., Miltenberger, 2016, p. 176); (2) using *ignore* in a functional behavior assessment or treatment evaluation (e.g., Cooper et al., 2020, p. 296); (3) as a response to minor problem behavior (e.g., LeBlanc et al., 2011, p. 479); and (4) when training other providers or caregivers (e.g., Martin & Pear, 2019, pp. 91, 173).

It is important to note that *ignore* is not only used under a variety of different circumstances in the published literature, but authors are often referring to different procedures. *Ignore* might mean that no programmed consequences are arranged following challenging behavior under specific circumstances (e.g., during a functional analysis condition; Falligant et al., 2021), or *ignore* might mean that a caregiver should minimize attention for challenging behavior, under functional communication training conditions (e.g., during caregiver training, Tsami et al., 2019). Some

articles specify the interval of time during which differential consequences should be withheld in order to constitute *ignoring* (e.g., Fisher et al., 2020) and some do not (e.g., Gerow et al., 2021). In sum, the use of *ignore* is widespread and has multiple different meanings, even within the field of behavior analysis.

Concerns

We have identified six concerns with using the term *ignore* (see Table 1); however, we acknowledge that there may be additional concerns.

Ignore as a Term

Our first concern is that simply telling people to *ignore* behavior is imprecise and does not meet the behavioral dimension of being technological (Baer et al., 1968). *Ignore* does not suggest what should be done in any specific manner or when it should be done (planned ignoring may be considered an exception when it involves a specific reaction to the target response). Although any given written plan might clearly define what is meant by *ignore*, the use of the term is suggestive of a particular manner of response that may or may not be precisely what the behavior analyst intends. Furthermore, the instruction to ignore behavior is likely to be interpreted differently by different listeners (e.g., babysitter versus behavior therapist).

Table 1 Concerns with the Use of Ignore in Research and Practice

Concern	Examples
Ignore is imprecise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaves what to do up to interpretation • Insufficient information and procedural integrity
Ignoring may be functionally irrelevant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May reinforce the problem behavior • May reduce likelihood of further analysis • May not address root cause of behavior
Ignoring some behavior can be dangerous	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer-directed aggressive behavior • Self-injurious behavior • Elopement
It may not be possible to ignore some behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential legal ramifications • Behavior elicits responses regardless of attempts to ignore (e.g., wincing)
Ignoring may not be socially valid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject to misinterpretation • Can be highly unmotivating and unpleasant to laypeople • May be viewed as neglect • May not consider cultural practices
Ignore is overused in caregiver training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May overgeneralize use of ignore procedures • May impede appropriate training <p>May put caregivers and behavior technicians at risk for injury</p>

Ignoring as a Procedure

Second, the instruction to *ignore* may be functionally irrelevant (e.g., if SIB is automatically reinforced) or, at times, functionally counterindicated (e.g., a *planned ignoring* procedure that involves turning away from escape behavior during instructional activity). With automatically reinforced behavior, some consequences, such as response blocking, can, at times, either extinguish the behavior (Smith et al., 1999) or punish the behavior (Lerman & Iwata, 1996). Ignoring the behavior may have no therapeutic value. In the case of escape-maintained behavior, *ignoring* might be construed by the implementer as an instruction to back away from the individual, which could reinforce the escape behavior. Other forms of problem behavior, such as crying, are not always operant behavior. *Ignoring* nonoperant behavior could exacerbate the conditions responsible for the behavior (e.g., a child in pain or discomfort might cry, and ignoring the cry may cause it to increase because the source of the pain or discomfort is not alleviated). In short, any manualized approach that involves *ignoring* does not inherently address behavioral function.

Ecological and Social Validity Concerns

Our third concern is that some behavior is simply too dangerous to allow (such as aggression toward another person, elopement into a busy street, and some forms of self-injury). It is easy to see how a behavior analyst could be liable if they gave a directive to ignore behavior in a written plan and the behavior then produces harm to self or others, or at least if that directive places people in immediate danger. For example, if a plan says to *ignore* problem behavior (that may include classroom disruption, aggression, etc.), and a teacher follows that instruction perfectly, it technically means that the teacher should not intervene when one student aggresses toward another.

Fourth, related to this, there are many cases when it is almost impossible to *ignore* behavior. Giving such a directive is to knowingly give an instruction that often cannot be implemented. For example, if a student or client makes an aggressive motion toward a teacher's face, they are likely to flinch, possibly shout, or block their face. The behavior analyst likely wants the implementer to minimize their reaction as much as possible (such as reducing conversation about the behavior).

Fifth, some individuals (e.g., consumers, caregivers, other professionals) are uncomfortable with the instruction to *ignore* behavior, and we should be attending to the social validity of our recommendations. Discomfort with the use of *ignore* could stem from cultural differences in reactions to problem behavior (e.g., Tsami et al., 2019), ethical concerns such as feeling that "ignoring" is unkind or cold (e.g., Critchfield et al., 2017), or other reasons. If it is not a socially valid treatment component, it is important to consider whether the instruction to *ignore* is needed. For example, if members of a culture believe that behavior requires a particular consequence and that consequence does not reinforce the behavior, there may be no reason to recommend withholding that consequence.

Our sixth concern is that suggestions to *ignore* behavior that are clinically used in caregiver and staff training may lead to unwanted generalization of usage without explicit consideration of any of the above points of concern. For example, a parent might be taught to ignore mildly disruptive behavior but then generalize the approach to a potentially dangerous situation (such as *ignoring* crying when a child is experiencing a medical emergency).

These six concerns demonstrate how the use of *ignore* is potentially dangerous and unnecessarily puts the behavior analyst in a position of liability.

Potential Solutions

We are in favor of phasing out the use of *ignore* when possible, and we will present some alternative terms and recommendations for behavior analysts to consider adopting in the future (see Table 2).

Be Technological in Writing

As mentioned, *ignore* does not meet the behavioral dimension of being technological (Baer et al., 1968). Most behavior analysts agree that it is important to be precise when describing exactly what the behavior-change agent did (in the case of a research study) or should do (in the case of a behavior plan). When looking for models of procedural descriptions, the behavior analyst will find many excellent examples of technological descriptions of extinction in the behavior-analytic literature (e.g., Ahearn et al., 1996). For example, descriptions of the nonremoval of the spoon have historically been thoroughgoing and technological but certainly would not be

Table 2 Potential Solutions to Problems with Using Ignore

Potential Solutions	Examples
Provide specific safety instructions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide explicit instructions to intervene and block ● Clearly outline safety procedures ● Clearly describe procedures and target behavior
Devise intervention plans without extinction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider if extinction is appropriate or feasible
Identify root cause	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Conduct functional analysis ● Function-based intervention ● Explore contributing factors
Account for consumer preference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Select interventions that are effective and maintain consumer comfort ● Incorporate information from caregivers ● Attend to terms used in procedure ● Identify culturally responsive practices
Be technological in writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use precision when describing procedures
Use precision to teach caregivers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clearly outline safety procedures ● Use evidence-based training procedures ● When using <i>ignore</i> provide a note of caution ● Provide a technological description

described as “ignoring.” Behavior analysts could use these as a model for their own descriptions of extinction involving other topographies and other reinforcers.

Even when extinction is not in place, it is important to use technological, procedural descriptions in lieu of *ignore*. For example, “When Emily engages in hand biting, neutrally guide her hand away from her mouth while continuing to engage in the activity that occurred prior to the hand bite.” A behavior analyst could also use an alternative term, such as “provide no differential consequences,” “no programmed consequences,” “no interaction condition,” or “minimize attention while ensuring safety,” but these phrases should also be accompanied by technological examples and always include descriptions of specific safety procedures. For example, one might both deliver an instruction in a written plan to provide “no differential consequences” for Emily’s hand biting mentioned above and provide the accompanying technological description of that instruction.

Devise Intervention Plans that Are Effective without “Ignoring”

As we have mentioned, *ignore* is commonly used to describe procedures intended to withhold reinforcement for undesired behavior, such as extinction (e.g., Fisher et al., 2020). It is important to note that extinction is a technical term that is inherently linked to behavioral function. That is, the procedural form of extinction varies depending on the function of the target behavior (Iwata et al., 1994b). By contrast, *ignoring* remains procedurally identical regardless of the function of the target behavior. Despite this distinction, when intervention plans include a procedural component designed to withhold reinforcement for target behavior, they may be more likely to include an instruction to *ignore* problem behavior.

To clarify, we are not advocating for the removal of extinction as a behavior-change procedure. There are certain circumstances in which extinction is warranted and can be implemented safely and with fidelity, such as in a hospital setting or in the treatment of pediatric feeding disorders (e.g., Haney et al., 2022). However, there are some circumstances in which implementing extinction is challenging or impractical (Vollmer et al., 2020), and in such cases, the use of the word *ignore* would be unhelpful. Fortunately, there is also research showing that differential reinforcement can be effective in the absence of extinction (e.g., Kunnavatana et al., 2018). By ensuring that reinforcement of alternative behavior outweighs reinforcement of the target behavior along several dimensions, including quality, immediacy, duration, magnitude, rate, and so on, behavior change over time is likely. When these differential reinforcement contingencies favor alternative behavior over target behavior, the necessity to include an instruction to *ignore* target behavior becomes moot.

Identify Behavioral Function and Root Cause

The value of conducting a functional analysis has been well documented. However, in some cases, it is not enough to say that behavior is “maintained by attention,” “automatically reinforced,” or “maintained by escape.” If a client is seeking attention, maybe they actually need us. If the behavior is automatically reinforced, maybe

it temporarily attenuates an aversive stimulus brought about by a medical condition (e.g., scratching a skin rash). If they are engaging in escape-maintained behavior, maybe they do not feel well. We would not ignore our partner or our elderly parent under those circumstances. *Ignoring* potentially puts a stop to the continued analysis to identify what is wrong and including it in our procedures may signal to others that behavior analysts lack compassion.

There are circumstances when increases in, or maintenance of problem behavior, are related to nonsocial stimuli, such as in the case of an ear infection or sleep deprivation. When behavior occurs under these conditions, the risk of reinforcing problem behavior is outweighed by the need to investigate root causes and protect the individual and others (McKeown et al., 2022). Instead of relying on the use of procedures that call for *ignoring* behavior, behavior analysts should collaborate with other providers to explore other contributing factors and address them accordingly. It is clear that pain and discomfort can interact with operant contingencies and exacerbate automatically reinforced behavior (Breau et al., 2003) and socially reinforced behavior (Kennedy & Meyer, 1996).

Provide Specific Safety Instructions

Behavior analysts should provide specific instructions on ensuring the safety of self and others when implementing behavioral interventions that involve withholding, removal, or minimizing social attention for dangerous or potentially dangerous target behavior occurs. This includes instructions on when to intervene to maintain safety, even if it conflicts with the contingencies outlined in the behavior-reduction plan. For example, in the case of a client engaging in peer-to-peer aggression, the behavior analyst should give explicit instructions to intervene and block aggression, even if the client has attention-maintained problem behavior. The instruction would likely include suggestions to minimize the social reaction (such as limiting discussion about the behavior while ensuring safety).

Account for Consumer Preference

It is imperative that behavior analysts account for consumer preference in the selection of interventions. Behavior analysts should identify procedures that, although they must be effective, maintain consumer comfort. We suggest that behavior analysts interview caregivers to determine their preferences, conduct descriptive assessments to evaluate common consequences that caregivers already deliver, and then test the effects of such consequences. Behavior analysts should then incorporate this information into treatment, model treatment options for the caregiver, and emphasize that treatment components can continually be adjusted. In choosing the terms to describe procedures, behavior analysts should attend to the terms that have historically produced negative reactions in the lay population and avoid them (Critchfield et al., 2017). Furthermore, it is important to identify culturally responsive practices and communicate thoroughly and effectively with interpreters when needed (Jimenez-Gomez & Beaulieu, 2022).

Use Precise Language when Teaching Caregivers

When training caregivers to implement behavior interventions, behavior analysts should clearly outline safety procedures as well as be precise in describing what the caregiver should and should not do in response to problem behavior. Behavior analysts should use evidence-based procedures such as behavioral skills training to train caregivers to mastery to ensure that interventions are implemented safely and with integrity (e.g., Bachmeyer-Lee et al., 2020). It is also important to avoid using *ignore* in these contexts so that caregivers do not use this term to communicate behavior-reduction strategies to teachers, family members, or babysitters (lest they should be generalized to dangerous behavior).

If using *ignore* is unavoidable, such as in circumstances when an interpreter might use the term (e.g., Dowdy et al., 2021), behavior analysts should provide a note of caution to the audience. For example, “When I say this, I do not mean that you should ignore the child or not intervene when safety requires it.” Whenever possible, document these clarifications and provide the stakeholders with a detailed technological description to accompany their lay interpretation.

Summary

We realize that the use of *ignore* is ubiquitous in behavior analysis, and many scientist-practitioners in the field use the term regularly. However, we have outlined that continued use of the term is likely or at least potentially problematic as it poses safety and liability risks for the client, implementer, and behavior analyst. Furthermore, the use of the term may reduce the social acceptability of applied behavior analysis and may disrupt relationship building with stakeholders. In the same way that our science evolves (e.g., LeBlanc, 2020), our use of terms should as well (Carr & Briggs, 2011). Problem behavior occurs for one or more reasons, including communication (e.g., Carr & Durand, 1985) or pain and discomfort (e.g., McKeown et al., 2022), just to name some important examples. Our goal is to remain acutely aware of the behavior, carefully evaluate it, ethically treat it, and functionally replace it. Our goal is not to ignore it.

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Declarations

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