

Personal Statement
Early Childhood Special Education

“Hooray! Great job! You did it!” I exclaim loudly, clapping my hands. I am doing what we call “going crazy” when Jeena does something she has never done in order to encourage her to try again. This time, she has put away the toys that she had been playing with when I asked. In my position as an Applied Behavioral Analysis Technician, I have worked directly with an early intervention program tailored for Jenna, a 3-year-old girl diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. In seven months of behavioral therapy, I have been on a team that has made a palpable functional difference in the life of this young girl, and her family. She has begun to understand the purpose of language and interaction and to use his limited language abilities to communicate, which is significant because much of his future depends on early intervention.

My applied work experience has helped me to appreciate the impact that appropriate intervention can have. While many may see my experience as focused on intervention solely regarding disability challenges, I see it as hands-on experience with direct intervention with the child, which is strongly applicable to my research interest in early childhood intervention. The ABA model, which is modified for each child, gives me a unique perspective and broader understanding when considering intervention programs designed to help a large population of children.

I came to work with Jenna based on the referral of my research mentor, Dr. Nancy Valtan, the primary investigator of a federally funded project regarding parenting children with developmental disabilities. Most recently, our lab team coauthored an article reporting that parents’ support with regard to the child, and SES variables predict coder impressions of parenting behavior. Different variables predicted parenting behavior in samples of parents with typically developing children compared to those with disabilities. Once again, although this research is in the context of disability, I feel the lesson learned about the many contexts that influence both child outcomes and parenting behavior is a valuable one. This research position has contributed to my interest in parenting and has given me an opportunity to sharpen my research skills from data collection and analysis through manuscript preparation.

Through my experiences I have developed a strong interest in early childhood intervention. Because in many cases a child’s behavior and skill set is a result of the child’s surrounding circumstances, such as poverty, and not so directly a result of irreversible biology as in the case of an autism disorder, I am especially interested in changes in the microsystem combined with direct intervention with the child. It is fascinating how intervention at this removed level can help a child in a significant way. For this reason, I would be thrilled to participate in Dr. Phil’s project on the impact of mothers in families of children with autism. Specifically, I feel that the next step of the project—gathering data to support an intervention for mother of these children and then developing the intervention—will be an excellent fit for me and a project to which I will be able to contribute my interests and closely related experiences in order to enhance family relationship quality. In addition to Dr. Phil’s work, I would be excited to be part of Dr. Oprah’s effort to train the parents of and professionals working with children with ASD.

Beyond my graduate career, I plan to continue intervention program design and evaluation. This aspect of research is essential to the programs’ outcomes and overall success, but more importantly, it ensures that interventions are serving the target children’s needs in the most effective way possible. I believe that the Special Education department will prepare me well for a career in public policy organizations, government, or private organizations that conduct research on intervention programs