

RBT Ethics Code: Ethical Scenarios from the Field

Section 1 – Responsible Conduct

Section 1.06: RBTs avoid multiple relationships with clients and supervisors. If they find that a multiple relationship has developed due to unforeseen circumstances, they inform their supervisor and work to resolve it. If the multiple relationship involves their supervisor, the RBT should report it to the person to whom their supervisor.

What is a Dual Relationship?

A dual relationship is defined as having both a professional and unprofessional relationship. As a professional, we need to have strict boundaries regarding our relationships with clients, caregivers, and other employees.

Examples of a dual relationship includes babysitting clients, attending social events with the client and/or caregivers (that is not approved from the BCBA in which treatment programs are not targeted), going on vacations with clients and/or caregivers, socializing with supervisors outside of work, adding clients and/or caregivers on social media, and receiving gifts and/or food from caregivers and/or clients.

Why Dual Relationships can be Harmful

Dual relationships can lead to possible harmful situations. When a professional has a dual relationship with a client, caregiver, and/or co-workers, scenarios may arise that can lead to a bias in judgement. For example, a behavior technician (BT) has been working with a family for over a year, and has become quite close to the family. The BT has attended birthday parties for the client and their little brother. The BT has even babysat for the family on multiple occasions. The BT did not see any harm in attending birthday parties and/or babysitting. One day the BT observes the client's mother hitting the client on the mouth when the client yelled. Due to the dual relationship that the BT has with the family, the BT begins to question whether or not to report the hit. The BT begins to justify that it is the only instance they have ever witnessed, and usually the mom is great with the client. Due to the dual relationship that has been established, the BT is hesitant to report the hit that occurred, even though we are all mandated reporters. It does become quite easy to slide down a slope of dual relationships. This is especially true in the ABA field due to the fact that we are spending so much time with our client's and caregivers.

Dual relationships can occur with supervisors as well. Having a dual relationship with a supervisor may also lead to harmful situations. For example, a BT has become increasingly close with their BCBA supervisor. They are working on a tough case, and they spend an increasing amount of time on the phone every night discussing the tough case. The nightly phone calls leads into going to lunch on the weekend. The lunches leads to spending the weekends together in which work is no longer a discussion. One day the BT notices that their supervisor is billing for services that they are not providing. Due to the dual relationship that has developed between the BT and the BCBA, the BT feels like they are being disloyal to their now friend (BCBA), so the BT does not report the BCBA for the violation in billing. The previous examples above are just a couple of examples of how dual relationships can be harmful.

What to do if Dual Relationships Occur

Both registered behavior technicians (RBT) and BCBAs need to uphold the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB) Ethical Code. The BACB states that if a dual relationship occurs, the RBT and/or BCBA must do everything possible to resolve the issue. During the initial intake of a client, caregivers are informed that RBTs and BCBAs may not accept any gifts and/or food. It may be difficult to refuse food in a client's home due to cultural beliefs of the caregivers. This is why the caregivers will be informed during the initial intake that RBTs and BCBAs are not allowed to receive any form of gifts and/or food. It may be difficult at times to refuse gifts and/or food from caregivers, especially if you are in their home. This is where the BACB Ethical Code becomes quite handy. The BACB Ethical Code can always take the blame for the refusal of gifts and/or food. It is highly beneficial to be able to say "I really appreciate the offer, but I have to follow very strict guidelines from the BACB". A great way to refuse a gift is to say "I really appreciate the thought, but being able to work with your kid is the greatest gift that you can give me", even just saying "I appreciate the thought, but a simple thank you is completely enough". There has been instances in which ABA professionals will use excuses such as "Oh I just ate, but thank you", or "I am actually allergic". This may subside the offer at the moment, but it does not fix the issue entirely. If a client's caregiver(s) repeatedly offer food and/or gifts, a discussion needs to happen with the BCBA that is supervising the case. The BCBA will explain to the family that we are not able to receive any gifts and/or food. The BCBA that is supervising the case will be more than happy to help in any of these situations. If a RBT ever has questions regarding the possibility of the development of a dual relationship, the RBT must seek advice from a BCBA. The BCBA will be more than happy to assist in the course of actions that needs to take place in order to resolve any dual relationship issues.

Further Reading on Dual Relationships

If you are not familiar with Behaviorbabe, it is a great resource to understanding different aspects of ABA. A link that further discusses dual relationships from Behaviorbabe is below.

<https://www.behaviorbabe.com/askbehaviorbabe.htm>

