



VIA Centers for Neurodevelopment

Placement Description

VIA is dedicated to helping people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach and adult services.

Intern or Field Placement Responsibilities/Opportunities

- Develop an understanding of VIA's mission, structure and delivery of service model
- Work on developing rapport and communicating effectively with clients, caregivers and staff
- Enhance understanding and knowledge of the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) or Clinical Psychology
- For students in ABA placements responsibilities and opportunities include:
 - Use reinforcement to promote socially significant behavior
 - Collect data during individual sessions and social skills programs
 - Design individualized goals and objectives for community-based programs or social skills programs
 - Implement educational and/or clinical behavioral programs as directed by the Behavior Analyst
- For students in Clinical Psychology placements responsibilities and opportunities include:
 - Observe therapeutic sessions with clients of various ages and abilities
 - Meet with clinicians to review therapeutic tools used in sessions and discuss treatment plans
 - Facilitate a group discussion and group activities for social skills programs
 - Support administrative needs including contacts with waitlist clients beginning intake process for services

Contact Information

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Read about students' experiences at this site below:

Spring 2024 - Snead

My field placement experience this semester took place at VIA Centers for Neurodevelopment, previously known as the Virginia Institute of Autism. VIA went through this name change in 2023 to create a more inclusive future for their clients and families as they provide services for more than just individuals with ASD. This aligns with VIA's mission statement stating that, "VIA is dedicated to helping people overcome the challenges of autism and related neurodevelopmental disabilities through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach, and adult services." This organization offers services for adolescents, adults, and parents in different locations in Charlottesville, which each come with the potential for observation experience. My direct placement and supervision took place with the Behavioral Health Services (BHS). In this building, I work with the psychological services team where clients can seek out evaluations and formal diagnoses, individual therapy, and/or group therapy. In the same building is VIA's ABA services, also known as Applied Behavior Analysis. This setting is for kids six and under for them to focus on developing communication, social interaction, cognitive skills, and behavior regulation through one-on-one support. In another location, we have a day school service known as the James C. Hormell School- or JCH. This school helps meet the needs for students that a public school system may not be able to provide. Across the street we have our adult services known as the Center for Adolescent and Adult Autism Services (CAAAS). The individuals here can benefit from developing their independence goals and from employment services. They can also receive behavioral consultations from the clinicians coming from BHS. Each of these services offers unique experiences and opportunities for VIA Interns. Within my position at BHS, I am most appreciative for my exposure to the assessment process and the other details that go along with it, like intakes or report-writing. I also got to experience and participate in more unique therapy sessions, such as play/expressive therapy. Including that, I was mostly impressed by the opportunity to gain experience about working with different age groups as VIA practically covers many of them. As mentioned, there is the opportunity to work with young children in ABA to adults in CAAAS, but also to work with caregivers. In BHS, caregivers have the opportunity to take part in individualized parent support sessions or something new I learned called, Parent-Child-Interaction Therapy (PCIT). Each of the services offered at VIA creates a unique learning experience for individuals interested in a variety of areas in mental health.



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Caregivers at VIA also have the opportunity to take part in a support group offered at BHS titled *Compassionate Care*. With the group's development starting during the COVID-19 pandemic, my supervisor aimed to create a space for parents to receive support and build a network in hopes to decrease stress and increase parent engagement. My supervisor wished to expand the impact of the group by diversifying the revenue streams to allow uninsured caregivers the opportunity to join said group. My contribution assignment involved constructing a grant proposal. The project for this proposal was to create an application-based scholarship to be given out to caregivers to cover the funds for the upcoming sessions of the group in the Fall. Unfortunately, I won't be able to be physically around to see out the hopeful implementation of an awarded grant. Fortunately, during the process I was able to work and learn from VIA's Director of Advancement who will be managing any updates along with my supervisor. I started officially writing the grant around March, but still felt that I was somewhat constricted on time due to my inexperience in grant writing and my desire to be able to produce a proposal to help my site. This is why for my additional materials I chose to create a training PowerPoint that covers information and tips about grant writing and how the process works with VIA. This PowerPoint will go into the shared drive at the unit where future interns will now have the opportunity to be introduced to grant writing from the start should they be interested in taking part.

As an aspiring school psychologist, I wanted to be part of a site where I would be able to learn applicable skills. Due to my experience at VIA, I was fortunate to not only learn about assessments and evaluations that will be an important portion of my future career, but also other aspects. I have been able to learn more about education and the challenges that occur for children with developmental disabilities. This also includes having the chances to be part of the process where clinicians focus on forming evidence-based interventions that will help assist them in academia and daily living. I was very impressed and quickly found myself comfortable at this site courtesy of the supportive individuals in the department. The only limitation is that group therapy is offered typically in the afternoon to help give time for adolescents coming from school. Due to this, I unfortunately wasn't able to participate and learn from this type of setting. Regardless, there were plenty and numerous other opportunities at VIA that left me satisfied with my education. Mentioning how groups take place in the afternoon, this can be seen as an advantage for future interns as I have found that there was no struggle or intimidation with trying to fulfill my required hours BHS had many open hours to take advantage of. Lastly, this site does take place in Charlottesville, Virginia. This wasn't an issue for me personally as I tend to enjoy long drives. If planning to join VIA, I would advise taking this as an opportunity to explore the Charlottesville area. I found being in a new environment to be very helpful for my mental health and stress management that came with my final year of undergrad while also doing graduate school interviews and applications.



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My psychology classes have prepared me well for this experience. More specifically, I feel that my developmental, abnormal, and child psychopathology courses have prepared me well for understanding psychological disorders and the diagnostic process. Taking child psychopathology at the same time as this internship has been beneficial as during the course my classmates and I have done case studies where we had the practice in discussing clients and their diagnosis. This practice almost mirrored the days where I sat in on group supervisions where some clinical residents might present one of their cases for guidance. I also feel that I had a beneficial preparation from being an Exceptional Education minor. In this minor, I was able to learn more about the autism spectrum disorder in a sequence of courses offered along with other educational aspects, like an individualized education program (IEP). This was beneficial when I had the chance to supply self-advocacy focused one-pagers for some of the older clients looking to participate more in their IEP meetings at school. Overall, VIA Centers for Neurodevelopment offers a supportive and unique field placement experience that has better prepared me for my future as a school psychologist.

Fall 2022 - Kate Ochalek

For my field placement this semester, I was given the opportunity to spend my time at Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA). VIA's mission is that they are "dedicated to helping people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach and adult services." Located in Charlottesville, VA, VIA offers a variety of programs and services, all grounded in the theories of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). VIA was originally founded in 1996 by four families in search of education for their children with autism; since then, the organization has grown significantly.

VIA currently offers three main programs: Day School, Adult Services, and Outpatient Behavioral Services. The day schools offer education to students with developmental disabilities that require additional support which typical public schools are not equipped to provide. The day schools are split into three levels across two campuses. The elementary school, also known as the James C. Hormel School, is for ages 6 to about 14, and they are taught at the Westwood campus. The Upper School, as well as the Post-High classroom, is for ages 14 to 22, and they are both located at the Hillsdale campus, otherwise known as the Center for Adolescent and Adult Autism Services (CAAAS). As the name suggests, the Upper School and Post-High classroom also share their campus with Adult Services, where here, consumers with developmental and intellectual disabilities above the age of 22 can learn vocational, behavioral, and life skills while receiving general day support (i.e., through staff providing basic care and supervision). Finally, Outpatient Behavioral Services, located at the Remson Court campus, provides individuals aged 6 to 22 with early and school-based intervention services.

Among the three programs at VIA, I chose CAAAS as my specific site. At CAAAS, my main experience consisted of observing and assisting in the general duties carried out by my supervisor, Megan, a Board Certified Behavior Analyst for one of the Upper School classrooms,



as well as one of three BCBA's that supervise the Adult Services classroom. Some of my responsibilities included: creating supplemental materials to be used as a part of behavior support plans (BSPs), contributing to the advancement of two separate research projects, collecting and organizing a behavior reinforcer "store" as a part of a token economy, and overall developing healthy, positive relationships with staff and consumers.

In addition to mini projects that I worked on here and there, my overarching contribution project for the semester was to teach a skill to the consumers at CAAAS. Through my observations, I got to see Megan facilitate a social skills group she created called *Tea Time*. Together, we thought it would be a cool idea if I took over for a month and taught a social skill that I would research and lesson plan. I decided to focus on teaching nonphysical boundaries since Megan had recently finished a unit on physical boundaries. I created 3 lesson plans, each of which was a different subtopic within the overarching theme of nonphysical boundaries. I presented information on what nonphysical boundaries are, then how to set them, and finally what to do if/when someone disrespects them. To structure the lessons, I used a Behavior Skills Training approach, a method Megan taught me and had been using to structure her lessons. For each lesson, I first lectured on the topic, using a Google Slides presentation as a visual aid. Then, I showed correct/incorrect examples of the skill associated with the lesson. This was done through video clips from TV shows that they enjoyed or through roleplay scripts that I wrote. To conclude each lesson, the group played a *Kahoot!* game that I created to test understanding of the subtopic and give feedback.

An advantage of being at CAAAS for my field placement experience is that I was able to get a very well-rounded experience. When choosing which campus would be my site, I took into consideration that I had already had some previous experience working with younger children on the autism spectrum. I was not sure whether to continue to build upon my experience with children or to go in a different direction. When discussing my options with one of the directors at VIA, they suggested how CAAAS, having both teens and adults, might be the "best of both worlds." Knowing what I know now, she absolutely pushed me in the right direction. At CAAAS, I got to truly experience a spectrum of different ages, different support needs, and *for sure* different personalities. One other advantage to my experience is that I felt I was given much autonomy over where I could dedicate my time. Megan told me about her research interests and the numerous projects on which she was working. After being able to observe Megan perform her various roles as a BCBA, she gave me the freedom to dive deeper into the areas I found particularly interesting.

The main disadvantage I found while completing my field placement at CAAAS was the amount of travel involved. Charlottesville is a little over an hour away from Harrisonburg; because I was also a full-time student this semester, I had to figure out early on a way to properly balance my time and energy. I decided the semester before that I would dedicate two days out of the week just for CAAAS, working about seven hours each day. The driving time was not always ideal; there were many days when I would leave my apartment before the sun came up and get home as the sun was setting. Also, depending on the day, Afton Mountain on I-64 would get densely foggy. Even with full awareness of the drawbacks, I for sure would not have changed my decision.

The success I achieved through my field placement experience at CAAAS could not have happened without me taking Psychology of Learning (PSYC 380) with Dan Holt and Applied



Behavior Analysis (PSYC 480) with Tonya Delp. These classes, as well as these specific professors, helped pave the way for me to snatch this great opportunity. I took Learning on a whim, simply because I needed it to fulfill major requirements. I ended up loving it and so, on Dan's recommendation, took ABA. I learned about VIA through a guest lecturer, learned about Field Placement being a good experience, and now the rest is history.

At CAAAS, I was able to learn so much about Megan's role as a BCBA. Before this experience, I had already known a little bit about what a BCBA did and was slightly interested in possibly considering it as a career path. It was not until this semester, though, through fully immersing myself in the world of ABA and experiencing some of what it is like to be a BCBA, that my career goals solidified. Without this experience, as well as everything that has led up to it, I would not have a clue in the world what I would want to do with my life. I am so, so grateful to everyone at CAAAS, both staff and consumers, but especially Megan (and her work friend, Jake) for mentoring me through this experience. Also, perhaps more importantly, for just being cool people.

Fall 2022- Shadther Feliz

My internship experience this Fall semester was at the Virginia Institute of Autism specifically at the Outpatient Behavioral Services. VIA's mission statement is: "The Virginia Institute of Autism is dedicated to helping people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach, and adult services." VIA provides three different types of services through the James C. Hormel school, which is a day school program where students whose needs of communication, social skills, and learning are too intense for public schools to meet. The Center for Adolescents and Adult Autism Services is composed of many programs which focus on life and vocational skills training. Both of these services provide educational and behavioral support. The Outpatient department consists of Center-Based Services, Psychological Services, and School-Based Intervention services. The center-based services consist of early intensive evidence based behavioral therapies. The psychological services consist of figuring out the strengths and weaknesses of the clients through diagnostics and assessments. School Based intervention services is a small team of BCBA and RBTs who work closely with schools to coach teachers to use effective behavioral techniques in their classrooms.

I was a part of the early intensive behavioral program for clients ages 2-6. I had the opportunity to work alongside Registered Behavior Technicians (RBT's) by shadowing them during their one-on-one time with clients. Their therapy sessions run from two hours to six hours per day and are based on ABA principles. They specialize and focus on improving emotional regulation, managing behavioral problems, school readiness, social skills, and daily tasks. The children arrive at 9am and stay at OBS until 12pm or 3pm. There are a few children who arrive from public school at 12pm and stay until 3pm. I arrive at 9am and stay until 3pm. When arriving in the morning I would choose an RBT to observe for the day and ask them questions about their clients. This gave me a chance to observe ABA in action, understand the appropriate terminology, and ask questions. An activity I would observe in the morning is circle time. Circle time is a program that introduces the children to a normal classroom setting. This essentially prepares them for school. I would participate and encourage the children to participate and praise



their accomplishments. Another program I would observe is table time which occurs in cubbies and this is where the RBT's focus is on the implementation of specific behaviors with the children. The last program I observe is individual programming in play which incorporates a combination of free play, and parallel play. I found observing the procedures during individual programming in play very interesting. It gave me a chance to see the techniques used to prompt children with autism to play together.

I had the chance to work on multiple parts for my contribution project. The main part of my contribution project was coming up with a solution for the staff to transition on time. At my site the clients and staff transition every 30 minutes from room to room. It is important that the staff transition consistently on time. This is to introduce the children to a rigorous school schedule to prepare them for preschool. Throughout my experience I observed and collected data on how long it took staff to take the initiative to transition. Due to this I understood the reasons why the staff were not transitioning on time and running over time for the next activity. The reasons are staff would forget to transition, lose track of time, or their child would have a tantrum. To help improve this I implemented an alarm system where a timer goes off five minutes before the 30 minute mark. This decreases the chances of running over time if a child has a tantrum and allows the staff to prepare before transitioning. This also gives enough time to take the children to the bathroom. As I was observing the children and collecting data, I noticed that when given the choice, they spent most of their play time interacting by themselves. I also observed the children do a lot of matching. This led to my interest in creating a structured play activity that would facilitate parallel play between children, which is foundational to developing social skills. I created a velcro matching bingo game where the goal was to match pictures to the bingo card. This activity was engaging for the children because matching is a technique that helps children with autism retrieve and recall information. During this activity some children did demonstrate parallel play, were engaged, and it also increased sharing as the children took turns to match each picture. Overall, It helped the staff balance attending to more than one child because now they have an additional interactive activity where children can play together.

An advantage that VIA has is that it is composed of hard working staff who believe in VIA's mission. The staff are very friendly and do not only have a professional relationship between each other but are able to be casual. There is easy access to speak to the Board Certified Behavioral Analysts (BCBA's) and the director of the clinic. Due to this I felt no pressure to speak to those in higher level positions. I had multiple meetings with my supervisor who is also a BCBA. In the beginning I was nervous to speak to her because of the importance of her job position but the casual atmosphere in the site made me feel more comfortable and supported. I appreciate this because I was able to balance being professional and being casual. Feeling like I can be authentic made my experience much easier. Another advantage at my site was how nice the staff was to me. I've learned a lot about their personal lives, experiences, and careers. The one and only disadvantage of the site is the distance. VIA is located in Charlottesville which is an hour drive. The reason I wanted to intern at VIA was to learn the appropriate protocols for helping individuals with disabilities. Through my shadowing experience I was able to learn how to communicate appropriately with those who have a neurocognitive impairment. I was able to lead circle time which taught me how to enthusiastically interact with small children. I learned to choose the appropriate data collection methods when measuring behaviors.



I have not learned much about ABA in my psychology classes at JMU. I was not knowledgeable about the aspects and terminology of ABA. I had general knowledge about it from taking psychology of learning where I learned about shaping, generalization, reinforcement, and extinction. My site has taught me what I wanted to know about ABA. I've learned the definitions and usage of words such as prompting, functional behavioral assessments, discrete trial training, differential reinforcement of other behaviors, and individualized education programs (IEPs). The skills and information that psychology classes have taught me better prepared me to be more ethical, compassionate, and patient for my internship site. These are skills that I will use in my future career as a clinical psychologist.

Fall 2022- Sarah Eggleston

This semester, I completed my field placement at the Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA), James C. Hormel (JCH) School, located in Charlottesville, VA. While VIA offers a variety of services through each of its three different locations, the JCH School focuses on providing year-round learning to school-age children and adolescents with autism and other developmental disabilities. Students who receive their primary education through VIA usually transition over to the Center for Adolescent and Adult Autism Services (CAAAS) by age 17, where they are eligible to continue receiving special education services until age 22. Thus, the majority of students at the JCH School range from ages six to 17. I worked in classroom one, which consists of five children between the ages of six to eight. Some of the students in classroom one communicate vocally, while others use forms of assistive technology to communicate. One student used a picture exchange communication system (PECS) to make requests from adults. VIA's mission is to "[help] people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach, and adult services." Its programs are built around the principles of applied behavior analysis (ABA), a systematic approach for helping learners with autism improve in their behaviors, communication, social skills, adaptive skills, and academic skills. Students who attend VIA are typically referred there by their local public school district when their needs are too intensive to be sufficiently met within their local school. At VIA, they are able to receive one-on-one academic and behavioral support and related services from a variety of professionals, including board certified behavior analysts (BCBAs), special educators, speech-language pathologists (SLPs), occupational therapists (OTs), and registered behavior technicians (RBTs). These services are built into their daily schedules and included within their individual education plans (IEPs).

As an intern, I was given the opportunity to do much of what the behavior technicians on staff at VIA do within a typical day. Since I received my registered behavior technician (RBT) certification prior to starting at VIA, I had some background in ABA, which helped me considerably when it came to running programs with students, tracking their behaviors, and implementing reinforcement schedules. My typical day at VIA began at 8:05 AM and ended around 2:45 PM. Because the commute to and from VIA is an hour, I reserved two days of the week as days in which I only went to VIA and did not attend any classes. Though the drive could be tiresome at times, I got through several audio books during my drives and appreciated the mountainous views along the way. My supervisor was extremely understanding and flexible regarding days when I could not make it due to illness or was running late due to traffic.



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Upon arriving at VIA each morning, I found out which student I was paired with for the day and prepared for that student's arrival. I helped him/her get off the bus and transition into doing morning work. Each child has an individualized set of programs and learning goals, so depending on which child I was paired with, the content we focused on varied. During the first few hours of the day, I ran through learning materials with students and provided them with reinforcement for remaining on task. Many of the students had token boards, which provided a visual representation and reminder of what tangible rewards they were working towards. For example, one student received tokens on a variable ratio- 4 (VR4) schedule, which meant that for roughly every four correct responses he gave, he received a token. Once he earned five tokens, he received five minutes of free time doing something that he preferred. This strategy helped students remain motivated and on-task.

Midway through the day, the students had lunch time, during which I also ate my lunch. Afterwards, we transitioned into recess. This was an ideal time to have fun and build rapport with the students. I often played tag with them or pushed them on the swings. At the same time, I helped ensure that they were playing safely with one another. Once recess concluded, the students were led in group carpet time and a phonemic awareness activity called "Heggerty". During this time, I continued providing students with verbal and tangible reinforcement using a token board. For the remainder of the day, students worked on educational programs including Lexia, Starfall, and ST Math, using the iPads. At 2:25 PM, students were released for dismissal. The students knew their daily routines well and relied heavily upon visual schedules to represent the sequence of events that took place during the day. Though I have learned about the importance of using visuals to support children with autism, this experience proved to me just how helpful they can be. A small change in the order of events could be a major source of stress or anxiety for some of these students. In order to present things more clearly and help students prepare for changes in routine, visuals were present all over the classroom.

Prior to this experience, I had learned about reinforcement through my psychology of learning class at JMU. In this class, the professor spoke in-depth about the differences between reinforcement and punishment, as well as why reinforcement tends to be much more effective than punishment. We also learned about the different schedules of reinforcement such as fixed/variable and ratio/interval. These terms came up often while working with students and were useful to know when communicating with my supervisor and other staff.

While I valued the opportunity to work so closely with the students at VIA, this experience helped guide my decision to become a school psychologist rather than a BCBA. Providing direct support to students with intensive needs was demanding and, at many times, stressful. While I really enjoyed working on students' academic, communication, and social goals with them, I was not as prepared to address problem behaviors such as aggression or self-injurious behaviors. I appreciated the safety care training that I received on how to respond when students were exhibiting noncompliance or engaging in unsafe behaviors; however, I always felt myself tense up during these kinds of situations. I would personally prefer to focus more on academic accommodations than on behavior reduction.

I particularly enjoyed getting to implement my contribution project at the end of my experience at VIA. Throughout the semester, I recognized how the students in my class struggled with taking turns with one another, so I created a lesson plan for teaching turn-taking. Through my research, I learned that video modeling is an effective strategy for teaching social skills to



children with autism, so I wanted to utilize it within my own lesson. I found relevant videos and created a visual support to help students know when it was their turn versus their peer's turn. These supports appeared to be helpful for the students, and I was pleased to see how well they engaged in turn-taking while using them. Overall, my experience at VIA has taught me a lot about my personal strengths and how I plan on supporting students with special needs in my future. It is rewarding to be involved in helping students become more successful and to see how much they can grow over just a short period of time.

Fall 2022 - Kim Cao

For my Field Placement, I interned at the Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA). VIA's mission is to "[help] people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach, and adult services." The programs and services at VIA are based on the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). VIA is made up of an interdisciplinary team of professionals with registered behavior technicians (RBTs), board-certified behavior analysts (BCBA), special education teachers, occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, clinical psychologists, and more. The professionals serve to help the clients learn a broad set of skills and meet their individualized education program (IEP) goals. There are three major programs at VIA: adult services, outpatient behavioral services, and the day school. I was specifically assigned to intern at the day school called James C. Hormel (JCH) School, in Classroom 3 with 3rd to 8th graders.

I was at JCH School Wednesdays-Thursdays from 12:30-4:00 pm. Throughout the afternoon, I helped the students stay on task during class and independent work. I also played with the students during free time and recess. Each day, I was assigned to work mainly with one student. When the student had independent-work time, I provided discrete trial training (DTT) to the student. DTT is an ABA method that systematically breaks skills down into smaller components that are taught in individual trials. For each trial, I gave the student a prompt, observed their response to the instruction, and then either provided reinforcement or correction to help the student learn. I collected data on the student's behavior and learning during DTT. The data we collected were examined during monthly data reviews to determine if the student has made progress in achieving their IEP goals and discuss whether the staff should change the strategy used for teaching/behavior modification. In addition to working directly with the students, I worked on two small projects. The students would leave around 2:30 pm, and the staff was there until 4:00 pm to prepare academic materials and activities. During the 1.5 hours after the students were dismissed, I worked on the projects. I set up a library-cataloging system for the school and completed Classroom 3's library catalog. I also compiled a list of recipes and activities into a document for the staff to pull from for 'Fun Fridays' when they run out of ideas. When I was not working on the projects, I was helping the staff prepare academic materials.

There were not many disadvantages to interning at VIA. A small complaint I had at the beginning of the semester was that VIA is an hour away. However, I started to look forwards to driving. It was time I dedicated to listening to podcasts, relaxing amid my busy schedule, and rehearsing for any presentation I had during the week. JCH School would not be suitable for Field Placement students who prefer to work with adults, are not patient, and do not like interacting in a fast-paced environment. VIA interns are expected to be proactive, approachable, and open to critiques. I found my experience at VIA to be highly rewarding because I was exposed to a variety of professions. I got to observe how the different professionals collaborated and communicated to maximize the students' learning and well-being. It was



evident that the staff truly cares for the students by the way they would respond to the students' needs. The greatest advantage of interning at JCH School was having the opportunity to form bonds with the students. There was never a dull moment at the site because students at VIA were creative, caring, and had big personalities. I had the privilege of getting to know each student individually while also observing how they interacted with each other as a class.

My experience at VIA helped confirm that I want to work with children and adolescents in the future. Becoming a BCBA is something I am considering. Our class BCBA, who was my supervisor, was respected by the staff. The staff often sought her advice for behavioral management and modification. I learned that she does not work directly with the students as much as the RBTs, but she oversees the entire classroom. At the same time, she also recognizes that each student has unique needs. Our BCBA made me realize that I would like to be in a supervisory position where others can rely on me. However, I am still open to exploring other career paths.

What I have learned in my psychology courses at JMU has helped me understand why certain strategies are implemented at VIA. From my Developmental Psychology course, I learned that reinforcement is more effective at modifying behaviors than punishment. VIA operates on reinforcement, and punishment methods are completely avoided because punishment creates a fearful environment for the students. I also learned about the different schedules of reinforcement from Developmental Psychology, so I was able to identify what schedules the RBTs were using for each student. My Research Methodology coursework taught me the importance of collecting data in a consistent manner to ensure reliability. How I collected data should have also been consistent with how the RBTs collected data, so I constantly asked the RBTs questions.

In addition to completing the smaller projects, I did a research project on effective communication strategies for problem-solving. After completing the research, I created a guidebook with step-by-step instructions for how to approach someone to 'talk' about an issue/conflict, how to use *I-* and *We-Statements* to express feelings and needs, and how to respond to *I-* and *We-Statements* with reflective listening, empathy, and gratitude. The guidebook also includes instructions for educators on how to set up a role play, so the students can rehearse the communication skills. The project was applicable to our classroom because the students in our classroom are verbal, and they needed more verbal communication tools to help improve and strengthen social relationships.

Overall, Field Placement was a valuable experience because it provided me with hands-on experience that I otherwise would not have gained in my classes. I looked forward to seeing the students each week because the positive bonds I had with them provided me with motivation when my workload was overwhelming. I felt that I was able to make an impact on my site with my projects. My confidence grew along with my knowledge of ABA.

Spring 2022 - Grace Meneilly

My placement this semester has been with the Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA), specifically at the James C. Hormel School. This is a full-day, all-year school primarily for children ages 6-22 with severe autism deficits and behaviors. Outpatient behavioral services and adult day programs are also available through VIA. Furthermore, other areas of services include outreach, education and adult life skill development. VIA has a mission to aid individuals with autism by using evidence based practices and the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis. Professionals also provide additional services such as, speech language pathology, occupational



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therapy, special education and clinical psychology. Personally, my typical day would start at JCH after the commute to Charlottesville around 8:00 AM and end around 3:00PM after the student's departure. I spent a lot of time engaging with the students and getting to know the staff. From the first day, all of the staff at VIA were extremely friendly and welcoming. I quickly realized how much I would enjoy this environment and the confidence boost I would receive from my supervisors and costaff. On site there are multiple classrooms, office spaces, a play gym, playground, kitchen and laundry rooms for life skills training; allowing for increased education and support. The layout of the facility alone puts emphasis on the importance of the learning environment and VIA's dedication to its students.

At the JCH School I had the opportunity to intern in Classroom 1, supporting eight students ages 7-10. In order to provide one-to-one individualized instruction, multiple Registered Behavior Technicians (RBT), a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) and Special Education teacher are staffed in the class. An advantage to working at this site was being supervised by a BCBA, for I have interest in going to grad school for this certification and gained valuable career advice from costaff. Furthermore, this classroom was extremely beneficial in increasing my field experience, for it exposed me to many individuals and situations I may face in my future career. One of the most beneficial aspects of my placement was being able to gain confidence in working with students with autism and become comfortable in a classroom setting. My classroom had a mixed group of nonverbal and verbal students, which allowed me the opportunity to work with diverse students across the wide range of Autism Spectrum Disorder. Due to this, I was exposed to different forms of alternative communication including Picture Exchange Communication Systems (PECS) and Proloquo2go, which is an Ipad speaking device. Learning how to work with new devices and then learning how to prompt the students' to use them correctly was another valuable field experience.

I found another aspect of immense professional growth in running programs such as Discrete Trial Training (DTT), working independently with students. This process introduced me to individualized learning and meeting students' IEP goals, for target skills across students were diverse and highly specified. Through these experiences I also learned the importance of prompt levels, keeping students engaged and providing specific reinforcement. Furthermore, many of the students utilize token boards and receive reinforcement on variable ratio schedules while working with instructors. This allowed me to take what I have learned in my coursework and put it into practice with actual students, which was very rewarding! While learning how to run programs with students, I also practiced different data collection procedures. Collecting reliable and accurate data in a fast paced manner is an important aspect of this field of work and highly valued in the science of applied behavior analysis. Additionally, I observed specific ABC data collection and worked with my supervisor to understand the importance of describing behavior in objective terms. My supervisors instructing and trusting me to work one on one with students was indefinitely the most valuable and advantageous experience of this field placement, while being very enjoyable. My site placement also gave me the opportunity to observe additional disability services because they were provided to the students in the classroom setting. The Speech Language Pathologist or Occupational Therapist would work independently with a student in the classroom while I was able to take note of their practices, and observe how they worked together cohesively with other behavioral staff in the classroom. Apart from this, some



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additional experiences I had at VIA included sitting in on an IEP meeting, observing student skills assessments, such as the VB-MAPP, and exposure to working with an ESL student.

With the help of Psych 495 I was able to research, create and implement a contribution to my site. I took interest in the lack of social skills development for students with autism and the negative effects of isolation, depression and low self efficacy that this issue can lead to. Following research, I implemented a task analysis prompting procedure to a board game activity in a social skills play group. This allowed students the opportunity to become more comfortable in a group setting and engaging with peers. Turn taking was a focus of the activity, for this is often a struggle for students with autism. Throughout the activity I observed the students and analyzed the data results which showed areas of improvement and highlighted skills that needed more training. The importance of these skills grows as students age and will be necessary for potential future transitions into typical classrooms, besides gaining the important ability to create meaningful interpersonal relationships. Although brief, experiencing the creation and implementation of a skills acquisition or lesson plan has given me increasing confidence in my abilities and future career path.

Overall, my field placement at VIA this semester has prompted me to reconsider my post graduation plans and seek out a position and environment similar to my site. I found comfort and comradery working with a team of coworkers and with different students in a classroom, rather than individually in a home therapy session. Furthermore, the JCH school is often for students whose behaviors are too disruptive or extreme to be dealt with in a typical, public school class. This often creates a potentially chaotic and intense, but interesting environment. There are instances in which staff may need to use blocking pads, and students may need to be restrained or attempt to escape from the building. I value the exposure I gained to some of these more extreme behaviors such as self injurious behavior, aggression and elopement. It was educating and of my personal interest to observe the staff handle these situations with composure and respect, while working together to prioritize staff and student safety. During my time at VIA, I realized I find crisis management and behavior reduction very interesting and rewarding work. In conclusion, my site has motivated me to stay within this field and provide services to individuals with autism who have more extreme behaviors, for those are often the children who need us the most.

Spring 2022 - Morgan Mabery

VIA's mission statement is: "The Virginia Institute of Autism is dedicated to helping people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach, and adult services." In their mission to serve individuals with Autism in a comprehensive way, VIA offers many services. The James C. Hormel school is a full-time special education school designed to serve students whose needs could not be served properly in the public schools. The Center for Adolescent and Adult Autism Services includes day-programs focused on teaching vocational skills to adult individuals with autism. Outpatient Behavioral Services (OBS) includes VIA's early intensive behavioral intervention program, in-home ABA services, as well as speech services and psychological services.



This semester I was an intern in the psychological services department of OBS. Psych services provides a number of services to clients including evaluations (educational and diagnostic), therapy/counseling, parent coaching, and social skills groups.

My main experiences consisted of observing and participating in therapy sessions. Therapists at VIA usually are cognitive-behavioral in orientation, and we treat the anxiety, depression, emotional regulation difficulties, and interpersonal difficulties that are often comorbid with Autism. Because most of the clients are young children, we used games and arts and crafts for therapy exercises. For example, one client was asked to draw a picture of his “worry bug” and write down things that bug told him, as well as to draw his “helper bug” and write down helpful things the bug can tell him when he is anxious. I was fortunate to be able to interact with therapy clients of many ages, from 8-20. In addition, because my supervisor knew I was interested in ABA, I was able to observe in the early-intensive ABA clinic in OBS. When an assessment was happening, I would observe those on our camera system and discuss the client with the clinician afterwards. These were always fun to hear about what the clinician is looking for and what the process is for making a diagnosis. One of my favorite parts of working at VIA was our supervision meetings and clinical rounds meetings. Supervision meetings happened between supervisors and interns and during that time we would discuss client cases and talk about the prep that is involved in therapy sessions, and also how to talk with client’s parents. Clinical rounds were a VIA-wide monthly meeting where we discussed a research topic related to Autism (ex. mental health and Autism). Those were really fun to hear from clinicians in all three departments of VIA.

Apart from practical observations, I assisted with the intake process. My job was to contact clients from our waitlist either via email or phone call, to see whether they still needed services at VIA. In addition, I worked for many weeks on a demographics project. For tax purposes and for the interests of the organization, I went through old files and gathered data on our clients from the past two years, including SES, race, diagnosis, gender, etc.

One of the biggest advantages of working at VIA is the interdisciplinary nature of the organization. There are psychologists, SLPs, BCBAs, and more. I was lucky enough to be able to work with professionals from many different fields and see how they all work together to provide care. In addition, VIA has one of the best work environments I’ve seen. Employees are shown so much appreciation, and everyone is good friends with each other. My favorite part of working at VIA was seeing the behind the scenes work that goes on in therapy. Not only did I get to sit in on therapy sessions, but also on the supervision sessions where we discussed cases and worked through problems.

The biggest disadvantage of working at VIA is the distance. It’s about an hour drive so I only went in two days a week. Since clients come in mostly in the early mornings and late afternoon through the evenings, that meant I had quite a bit of time at my desk. Once I had a few long-term projects to work on, I filled my time being productive, but there were definitely days where I wish I had more to do between sessions.

The biggest influence my experience at VIA has had on my career goals is figuring out which population I’d like to work with. During my experience at VIA, I learned that I most enjoy working in early intervention (ages 2-6), which will be helpful as I am going into the ABA field and clients can be from all ages. I knew I was going to grad school for ABA before coming to VIA, but my experience confirmed that I do enjoy it and that I am in the right place. Though I



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was not an ABA intern, my experience in psychological services will help me to understand the challenges my clients will face in the future and gave me more of an idea of what kinds of challenges are helped by ABA, and which by psych, and will help me to know as an ABA practitioner when I need to refer clients to other services. During one of our group supervision meetings, we had a conversation about trauma-informed ABA that I found really interesting. My supervisor said that trauma-informed care is not yet fully developed within ABA so that is definitely something I'm going to have to be aware of and look into myself as I grow in my practice.

The classes that most helped me at VIA were clinical psychology (at the 400 level), ABA (at the 400 level) and my EXED minor classes in the Autism sequence. These classes gave me a good general idea of what clinical psychologists do, the basics of ABA, and what Autism is, that when I was at VIA I could focus on learning the more detailed parts of the work that could not be learned in a text-book.

Going into field placement I knew I wanted to do something related to supporting parents, and my supervisor identified a need to create written materials for parents to take home. I created six handouts for parents on parenting skills (based in ABA) that are most commonly used in VIA's parent coaching services. The topics were: Time-out, Differential Attention, Providing Choice, Positive Reinforcement, Visual Schedules, and Giving Effective Commands. To create them, I went through some of VIA's older resources, as well as searched the web for other organization's resources, and collected the most important pieces of information on each topic. The handouts themselves included a description of the parenting technique, tips for how to implement it, and photos/diagrams on procedures for implementation. The handouts are available now to the clinicians at VIA to give when doing parent consultations. In addition, they were thinking of putting the handouts on their website as resources for parents on the waitlist for services. I suggested doing some sort of data collection to see how parents like the handouts and what should be changed, if anything, which my supervisor said they may do after the handouts have been used for some time.

Spring 2022 - Haley Gardner

This semester my field placement was at the Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA). VIA's mission states that they are "dedicated to helping people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach, and adult services." VIA is divided into three main branches through which they offer multitudes of services. First, VIA has the James C. Hormel school which works with kids aged six through twenty-two. Next, VIA provides outpatient behavioral services which focus in clinic and school based early intervention, home visits, psychological services, and language therapies. Lastly, VIA has a Center for Adolescent and Adult Autism services (CAAAS). This center focuses on educating our older high school students and strengthening independence as well as vocational skills in our adult services program. VIA provides various services that allow for any intern to have plenty flexibility in where they would like to gain more experience. Field placement students can work in any one of the three overarching services mentioned. This is important as a student as it allows



you to explore your interests while also gaining more experience in areas that one may not have known about.

My experience was centered around CAAAS and the services they provide. I got to work with individuals aged 18-22+, through our school program and adult day support. I really enjoyed working with this population, because prior I had limited exposure to older individuals with adult spectrum disorder (ASD). Working at CAAAS has numerous advantages. First, the staff is very diverse in qualifications and experience. The staff members come from all different educational backgrounds, which allows you to get multiple perspectives on the work that they are completing. I really enjoyed working closely with the behavior analysis team, because I am interested in this field as a future career. Secondly, because CAAAS houses adolescents and adults, interns can work with and learn from two populations at once. This allows for the intern to have some flexibility in the students they work with and determine which population they work best with. Lastly, the staff at VIA is very inclusive and supportive of one another. This allows for a peaceful and productive work environment, which encourages growth and learning in our staff as well as consumers. At VIA I felt welcomed from my first day and was very comfortable each time I was there. Any questions or concerns I had were always taken care of and I felt like my learning experience was highly prioritized. The only limitation that I can think of is that VIA is in Charlottesville, therefore it is an hour drive for us JMU students. I personally did not mind the drive as I knew I was going to a site where I was making steps towards my professional career. However, this should be considered when thinking about interning at VIA because of possible scheduling and transportation issues.

Going into this experience I really wanted to strengthen my communication skills with those with ASD, as well as gain a deeper understanding of what working with this population would look like. As I progressed through the semester, I strengthened my communication skills with our consumers. I found myself being more comfortable in approaching them and initiating conversation. Also, the consumers returned that comfort and began calling me by name which was an amazing feeling in itself. Additionally, I learned more about how the staff works as a team to address each individual need of our consumers as well as creates plans that promote learning and productivity in the ASD individuals. While a lot of my time was spent observing the students, I spent just as much time observing the staff. Through these observations, I was able to learn the significance in collaboration and respect in a workplace. The staff consistently talked with one another about solutions for various students and what projects to start to make VIA better as whole.

Within the psychology major at JMU, students are exposed to many topics and concepts from the greats of psychology. This curriculum allows students to gain a detailed understanding of various areas of the psychology field. VIA is rooted in evidence-based practices, one of which being applied behavior analysis (ABA). ABA is an interpersonal therapy that focuses on improving social skills by interventions based on the concepts of learning theory. Therefore, my PSYC 480 course (applied behavior analysis) was easily the most beneficial to me during my time at VIA. In class we learned about the concepts of reinforcement, schedules, contingencies, functional analyses, data collection, target/problem behaviors, and so on. At VIA I was able to firsthand witness all the concepts learned in class. This was such a rewarding experience as I was able to apply what I learned in the classroom to a real-world setting. I also was able to learn about these concepts in more detail and form my own thoughts on these concepts.



The overarching goal of my contribution project was to improve the vocational skills in one of VIA's adult consumers. At CAAAS we have a fully stocked and functioning café. This café is self-serve and is available to all staff during work hours. This café also serves as the perfect environment to teach practical and vocational skills. These skills could include cleaning, stocking, taking inventory, and more. This semester I worked a lot on the behind the scenes work of preparing this café to be run by our students. By having our students run the café, it would allow them to learn the proper social and vocational skills in a work environment. Therefore, after proper acquisition they would be able to gain outside employment easier. Besides a lot of the prep work, I got the opportunity to be trained and educated by my supervisor in behavioral skills training (BST). By learning this process, I was then able to use it to teach one our adult consumers how to clean the café's coffee machine. This was a skill that we chose as it is a key job during the closing shift of the café. Through baseline, roleplay, and post-BST phases I was able to teach the adult consumer how to successfully clean the machine by herself. By her being able to master this skill it brings her one step closer to being able to independently run the café. During these sessions, I created various cleaning and task checklists that allowed the consumer I worked with, as well as others, know what tasks they should be completing when they come to "work." These checklists, especially the machine cleaning, demonstrated their effectiveness by the adult consumer being able to independently clean by using the list. I thoroughly enjoyed working with my supervisor on my project and the learning process that it provided me. This experience is a lot of hard work, but the rewards it reaps far outweigh any initial worries. I have the utmost respect and gratitude for VIA and all the individuals I had the opportunity to meet.

Fall 2021 - Samantha McQuillan

During my fall semester of 2021, I had the opportunity to be an intern at the Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA) in Charlottesville, Virginia. VIA's mission "is dedicated to helping people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach and adult services." I worked specifically at the Outpatient Behavioral Services (OBS) branch of VIA, which specializes in providing Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) to children ages two to twelve who have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Their use of ABA expands to the fields of behavior analysis, childhood special education, speech-language therapy, clinical psychology, and occupational and physical therapies. VIA is divided into three separate service areas that cater to the different needs of families. Outpatient Behavioral Services (OBS) provides occasional support for children who need help with social skills, school readiness, daily tasks, or management of problem behaviors. They provide diagnostic evaluations for children with ASD as well. The James C. Hormel (JCH) School provides full-day, year-round services for individuals who are looking for help relating to communication, behavior, learning, and social interaction. Students may attend JCH when public school settings are not the right fit for them or if they simply need more personalized educational services. The Adult Services branch serves autistic individuals of 22 years of age and older who are seeking services for developmental or intellectual disabilities. Their services range from learning meaningful engagement to personal growth and individual choice.

During my time at OBS, I had many opportunities to spend time with and observe the staff while they worked. I specifically spent a lot of time with the Registered Behavior



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Technicians (RBT's) by shadowing them during their one-on-one time with clients. Clients come in at 9:00 AM and either stay at OBS until noon or 3:00 PM. I really enjoyed the routine of saying good morning to the staff and the clients in the morning. I did this as a way to see who was there on that day and to remind that I was there that day as well. The RBT's spend the most time with the clients, so I was given the chance to see ABA in action quite often. I was also able to spend a lot of time working with my supervisor. We had daily meetings where I was able to tell her what I had been working on recently. During these meetings, she also provided me with feedback and direction so that I could get working on whatever else she needed me to do. My supervisor also let me sit in on team meetings every Friday afternoon. Each team cares for a different set of clients, so each team has a meeting at the end of each week to get caught up on how everyone's weeks went with their clients and to discuss any questions or concerns that they might have. Finally, I had the opportunity to present my contribution project to the entire OBS staff. This was my first big presentation in front of a professional staff, so I felt very accomplished.

For my contribution project, I worked on creating and implementing a Circle Time program for OBS' newly created preschool schedule. Circle Time is a program that is normally ran by preschools and kindergartens in order to teach young students about how school classrooms work. It is aimed at exposing children to a normal classroom setting before they enter elementary school, so that they already know the basic information that they are expected to learn by the end of preschool or kindergarten. My supervisor came to me with this idea, and I made it happen. She had me read a scholarly article entitled Evaluation of a Classwide Teaching Program for Developing Preschool Life Skills. Within this article, the author Gregory P Hanley discusses how Circle Time programs for children who exhibit problem behavior normally focus on four preschool life skills: information following, communication, friendship skills, and delay tolerance. We based a lot of what we did off of this article.

One major disadvantage with being placed at VIA is the hour-long drive that you will have to make to and from Charlottesville. This was something that I was hesitant about before I started, but it really was not as bad as I thought it would be. There were a handful of times where there were accidents that made me a little bit late, but I would just make up the lost time at the end of the day. I had a nice routine of listening to music and podcasts during my drives, which made the time go by faster. Other than that, I do not have any other disadvantages to this experience. Practically everything about my internship was an advantage to me. I was instantly taken in under everyone's wing and I felt accepted the whole time I was here. They have created such a positive, supportive environment at VIA, and it is a treasure to spend time there.

I have many takeaways from my time with VIA. However, I primarily have learned a lot about myself and what to look for in my future career. I have always wanted to work with children, so being able to interact with young children with autism has taught me that I am suited to do this kind of work in the future. Communicating with children on the spectrum is not something that I have had much experience with, so I learned by observing the ways that the staff interacted with the learners. Unfortunately, I do not want to do ABA specifically like I used to in the past. I now want to be a school psychologist in an elementary school. With this career, I will be able to use my experience at VIA to my advantage. I had so many positive interactions with the learners here and I look forward to the learners that I will get to work with in the future.



I have briefly learned about ABA in my psychology classes at JMU, but not nearly enough to start speaking in ABA terms at my first day on the job. I had some general knowledge of the more well-known aspects of ABA in psychology, such as extinction, reinforcement, generalization, and shaping. I quickly picked up on newer terms like manding, probing, prompting, pairing, and tacting. The general knowledge that my major classes have taught me made it easier to learn these terms and to associate them with their function after I observed them in action with our clients. This experience has really shown me that psychology is what I was always meant to do.

Spring 2021 - Emelie McElroy

During the Spring 2021 semester, I've had the privilege to intern at the Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA) in the Outpatient Behavioral Services (OBS) section. The Virginia Institute of Autism is a non-profit organization that provides a wide variety of therapeutic services to people diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. VIA's mission statement is as follows, "The Virginia Institute of Autism is dedicated to helping people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach and adult services." VIA's programs and services are built around applied behavior analysis (ABA) principles and provide behavior analysis, childhood special education, speech-language therapy, clinical psychology, along with occupational and physical therapies and services. VIA has three different sections that serve different populations of people diagnosed with autism. The Outpatient Behavior Services section, which is where I've had my field placement experience, provides early intensive interventions and parent training programs for children, adolescents, and their families. The James C. Hormel School is another section of VIA that provides year-round day school services to students between the ages of 2 and 22 who are diagnosed with autism. The JCH school also partners with local school districts to serve students whose needs for learning, communication, behavior, or social interaction are too intensive for a public-school setting. The last section of VIA is the Adult Services section. Adult Services provides learning and personal growth opportunities for adults with autism in environments that promote success. I spent my field placement experience solely at OBS, where I got to experience ABA-focused therapy first hand, while working directly with clients, registered behavior technicians (RBTs), coordinators, and supervisors.

During this past semester at the Virginia Institute of Autism, I've gotten a lot of valuable, first-hand experience. I had many opportunities to shadow RBTs, the people who provide direct care to the clients. I observed many assessments and programs that were run to improve each individual client's skills. I learned so much about autism spectrum disorder and ABA throughout this semester, that I wouldn't have been able to elsewhere. I learned about vocabulary words that are commonly used in this field of work along with the meaning behind each program, assessment, and activity that was run. Along with observing therapy sessions, I was able to increase my knowledge and experience through research and data tracking for my contribution project. My contribution project focused on Natural Environment Teaching (NET), so I was able to learn about this ABA technique more in depth as well. Most of my time at VIA has been dedicated to my contribution project, which focused on observing the RBTs and their incorporation of NET into therapy sessions. I took baseline data, implemented materials



throughout the site that served as reminders for various NET-focus points, and took post-implementation data to track whether or not the materials were helpful. After the post-implementation data was taken, I created a treatment development program that will be used as a training to remind RBTs on the importance of NET. I've really enjoyed seeing things in person that I've learned in a classroom. It's such a cool experience to be able to put things into practice that you've read about in a textbook.

Along with working with clients and RBTs at the site, I've also had the opportunity to work with someone from the Human Resource department throughout this semester. I've assisted with transferring RBT training PowerPoints from the old VIA format to the new one. Working with Julie has helped me see a different side of VIA that I've really enjoyed. By working on these PowerPoints, I've been able to learn about the RBT training process and see what onboarding is like for new RBTs is. Julie has also invited me to sit in on multiple RBT training sessions, so it's been really cool to participate in those. Along with updating PowerPoints, I've also been able to join the weekly team meetings. These meetings have been valuable because I've been able to see more of a behind the scenes perspective about what goes on at the site and I have the opportunity to learn more about each client and their individualized treatment plans.

Overall, my field placement experience at VIA was better than I could have expected. I've learned so much over this semester that will be helpful for my future. One of the most eye-opening parts of my experience has been the shadowing I've done of the RBTs working with clients. I've been able to form relationships with both the RBTs and clients, which is reflective of what a future job may look like. One thing to keep in mind about VIA is that it's in Charlottesville, so it's about one hour a way. If VIA is of interest to you, I would suggest arranging your schedule to have a full day available to go to the site. This semester, I went once a week and arranged for my Wednesdays to be completely free so I could dedicate it to VIA. Another thing I would suggest when working for VIA is that you have patience and flexibility. There are a lot of moving parts at VIA, especially OBS, with the clients, families, meetings, and more that go on. It's important that you're patient with your supervisors, because they're very busy, especially with the constant adjustments that occur because of COVID-19 guidelines. There are a lot of opportunities for you to take initiative with how you make the most of your days at the site, so be prepared for that as well. I enjoyed this part of my experience, because this was an area that I needed to grow in. After this experience, I'm very comfortable making my own schedule, talking to various people about their schedules and adjusting from there.

After interning at the Virginia Institute of Autism for a semester, my perspective on this field of work has increased immensely. The main thing I learned from VIA was about ABA, in general, and ABA-focused therapy when working with children with autism. Before this experience, I've never working with anyone with autism. The only experience I've had working with people with special needs was with someone my age with Down syndrome. Working with people with special needs is something that I want to incorporate into my future career. Now that I have had this experience of working directly with children with autism and expanding the types of special needs I've experienced working with, those feelings are definitely validated. This field placement internship was a learning experience for me and I grew a lot from it. I'm so thankful for all of the learning and professional growth opportunities this experience has brought me. If working directly with children with autism in a therapy-focused environment is something that



interests you, I highly recommend interning at the Virginia Institute of Autism. If you're looking for an environment where you'll learn a lot and have hands-on experience, I also recommend the Virginia Institute of Autism. VIA, especially OBS, promotes learning and growth opportunities for their staff, clients, families, and community. My experience at VIA has definitely provided me with all of those things and has helped me form a better idea of how I want my future to look.

Spring 2021 - Kate Foley

This semester I had the honor of interning with the Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA) in Charlottesville, VA. The organization's mission states that "The Virginia Institute of Autism is dedicated to helping people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach and adult services." To accomplish this mission, the Virginia Institute of Autism uses the principles of applied behavioral analysis in order to address the core symptoms of autism within the services they offer. VIA offers three core services which include Outpatient Behavioral Services (OBS), the James C. Hormel School (JCH), and the Center for Adolescent and Adult Autism Services. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, interns have been able to observe each of the core services, however this semester I had the wonderful opportunity of working with the staff and clients at the Outpatient Behavioral Services clinic. OBS provides clients Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) therapy, Parent Training, Psychological Evaluations, Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT), and Speech and Language Therapy in home, the community, and the clinical setting. Most of the clients who receive services at OBS are young children with autism.

I spent most of my time working alongside one of my supervisors, Caroline Salzman, a BCBA at the OBS clinic. Due to COVID-19, the number of clients and staff present in the building when I first started was limited, however as the semester went on more clients were able to come into the clinic. Over the course of my experience, I was able to learn common ABA terminology, become familiar with the Competent Learner Model (CLM), observe numerous ABA therapy sessions and parent training sessions. Before interning with VIA, I honestly was not sure how effective ABA therapy was, but after learning and observing ABA sessions I realize how valuable this type of therapy is. I was overwhelmingly impressed by how the Registered Behavior Technicians (RBT) worked with the clients, and how much the clients would progress week to week. Some of my favorite moments while interning was watching clients overcome challenges and show improvement. In addition, I learned and became familiarized with alternative communication systems such as PECs that some clients use as an alternative form of communication. I was able to observe one client learn how to use PECs for the first time. It was exciting to watch the client's progression of being able to communicate through PECs.

One of the projects I completed involved finding pictures, printing, and laminating them to be used for lessons of the CLM. In addition, I organized the materials in boxes for lessons 4-11 of the CLM. This helped me learn more about the lessons in the CLM such as listener (adhere- to-touch), Observer (matching-sorting), and observer (tact). For my contribution project I created sensory bins filled with sand, and kinetic sand, ladles, sand toys, and shovels. Through



creating the sensory bins, I was able to learn a lot about play. I learned that play, especially active play, does not come naturally to all children. Play is essential in children's development, so the RBTs and my supervisor would often help the children engage in play. It was fascinating to observe how the children played and interacted with the toys.

I was a sophomore when I first heard about the Virginia Institute of Autism. One of my professors knew I was interested in working with children with autism and shared information about VIA with me. It was honestly my dream to have a field placement experience with them, and I feel so honored to for the opportunity to intern with them. It far passed my expectations and everyone was welcoming and friendly. On the first day I interned the staff and my supervisors made me feel like part of the VIA family. I really enjoyed working with the kids and staff. Everyone was eager to teach me anything about VIA, ABA therapy and autism in general. In the beginning every staff member was eager to learn who I was and include me. I am so grateful for my supervisors who answered every question I had and took the time to explain terms to me that I didn't understand or was unfamiliar with. One of my favorite parts about VIA was getting to work directly with the children. I also always looked forward to talking with staff members as well. VIA is an hour away; however I absolutely felt the drive was well worth the experience. I felt inspired each time I left the clinic because of how passionate all of the staff members were about working with the clients.

My internship at the Virginia Institute of Autism allowed me to expand my knowledge of ABA therapy and autism. Interning with VIA helped me realize that I would like to become a RBT and eventually a behavior analyst. In addition, I am interested in opening up an organization similar to VIA in my home state of New Jersey. After interning with VIA, I see how important their services are to the autism community. I am so impressed by the amount of services they offer within the same organization. From experience, I know how hard It can be to find services for individuals with autism. VIA makes it easy for families and individuals with autism because they have all the services an individual with autism may need. I would highly recommend VIA to future field placement students.

Spring 2021 – Brooklin Davis

My field placement at the Virginia Institute of Autism this past semester allowed me to not only gain experience in the field of applied behavior analysis (ABA) but also grow as an individual in the workplace. Their mission statement is "helping people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach and adult services. VIA applies the principles of ABA to meet their clients' and families' needs. Their organization provides services through their 3 branches of programs which are: Outpatient Behavior Services, the Adult Academy, and the James C. Hormel School. The past semester I was placed at the James C. Hormel (JCH) School. The school is a year-round day school that serves individuals diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) between the ages of 2 and 2. Their services employ specialists in the fields of behavior analysis, special education, speech-language therapy, occupational therapy, and physical therapy. The students are separated into classrooms based on age. This semester I was placed classroom 1, where the students ranged from 5 to 8 years old. Within the classrooms there is a 1-to-1 student to teacher ratio. The



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teachers paired directly with the students are registered behavior technicians (RBT). Each classroom is overseen by a Board-Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA).

During my time at the James C. Hormel School, I was given several experiences and opportunities. I spent the majority of my time observing a BCBA and several RBT provide services for students. This opportunity allowed me to take the knowledge that I have learned through other internships and psychology classes, especially Learning Psychology, and see the principles of ABA performed in-person. After a few weeks of observing, I was able to pair with students myself and eventually run programs myself. I thought that running programs allowed me to achieve my idea of what I want to obtain out of this field placement. I was able to not only gain hands-on experience working with children with autism using the principles of ABA but also be coached through the process by RBTs. I learned a lot from the staff in my classroom through observing them run programs and also through the feedback I was given from them after running programs.

In addition to observing and running programs, I was able to participate in working on a course of study for my supervisor, John Prickett. This course of study was on the Competent Learner Modules (CLM). These modules are a multi-component instructional package containing solutions for solving major problems faced by educators and parents of children with autism and other significant learning challenges. CLM contains learner assessments, curriculum, and staff training components. The modules were found online, which allowed me to gain hours while completing these modules at home. Since VIA was an hour commute for myself, my supervisor and I decided this was the perfect opportunity for me to earn all my hours by completing these modules on days that I wasn't coming into the school. After I completed a module, I would perform a check-off list with a RBT at the school to make sure that I understood the material in the module. This was an amazing opportunity for myself because the CLM was something that I hadn't heard of until coming to VIA and I was able to gain so much from the program. I think this program is upcoming in the field of ABA and I'm glad that I had the chance to learn so much about it.

Within the CLM curriculum, there program used called observer sorting. Which allows students the match identical and similar objects to on another to improve their discrimination and generalization. For my contribution project I put together an observer sorter kit for all the classrooms at VIA to use. My supervisor had me focus on the first 13 lessons. Each lesson the materials needed changed depending on the curriculum. The kit I created separated each lesson into bins that included all the materials need and format sheets to go along with each. This made finding the appropriate materials more convenient for the staff. Researching on the CLM and making the kit allowed me to dive deeper in the CLM material and get a grasp on the "why?" behind implementing this within the schools.

I chose this site because of my plans to earn my BCBA certification in a few years. I believe that my experience working at VIA was exactly what I was hoping it to be. I feel like this experience gave me the hands-on experiences that I need to help me become a better therapist. I'm still not sure which path I want to take after becoming a BCBA, but this experience definitely gave me a positive look on what to expect from working at an ABA-based school as a BCBA. My field work this year definitely prepared me for my practicum that I will be starting next semester for graduate school. Overall, I recommend any student wanting gain experiences in the field of applied behavior analysis or working with children diagnosed with ASD to apply



to this site. The experience allowed me to not only expand my knowledge in the field I'm pursuing, but it also allowed me to grow as an individual in the workplace. I'm extremely grateful for this experience and each person that I interacted with during my time working at VIA. I can't wait to carry the knowledge I gained through this experience with me in graduate school and in my career.

Fall 2020 – Jacky Kennedy

My field placement experience at the Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA) this last semester taught me a great deal about applied behavior analysis (ABA), the workplace, and my future career goals. The mission statement of the organization is that "The Virginia Institute of Autism is dedicated to helping people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach and adult services." To accomplish this goal, the Virginia Institute of Autism employs applied behavior analysis in the treatment of their clients. Structurally, VIA has three branches, which include Outpatient Behavioral Services, the Adult Academy, and the James C. Hormel School. In previous semesters, the interns have had the opportunity to observe operations in each of these three divisions, however, with the COVID-19 pandemic, I enjoyed my time this semester at the Outpatient Behavioral Services clinic. Operations at the clinic were also a bit different this semester due to social distancing guidelines, so my small-group experience will likely be unique to this semester. However, I think that working in a smaller cohort provided me with the opportunity to really get to know the staff and to focus closely on the skill development of the two children that were allowed in the clinic.

During my time at the Virginia Institute of Autism, I had the opportunity to observe and participate in direct ABA services with clients under the supervision of a Registered Behavior Technician (RBT). It was exciting to watch the children grow and develop their skills over the course of the semester. In each session, we used token boards and other tangible rewards to encourage each child's participation. Just a few of the skills we worked on included: manding for an item, matching pictures to a sample, identifications of objects and their features, and problem-solving puzzles. It was a connective experience to use token boards with the children at the center as this was a strategy I learned about in my coursework at JMU. Learning about something in the classroom and seeing it used in real life was a very rewarding part of my field placement. If a student enjoyed taking Learning Psychology at JMU, I think that they would enjoy this field placement as many of the class concepts are implemented at the Virginia Institute of Autism.

Additionally, I had the opportunity to observe the clinical psychologist in session with her clients. With my interest in school counseling, it was very interesting to me to observe the delivery of counseling services to children with autism. I learned that some children with autism can be more literal thinkers, therefore, counseling services may need to be designed a bit differently. A great deal of the focus in these sessions was also on social and emotional learning,



which can be particularly challenging for children with autism. I hope that this experience will help me in developing appropriate materials for social and emotional learning activities in my future capacity as a school counselor.

Finally, I spent a majority of my semester interacting with the assessment materials used to determine the baseline skill levels of clients. Throughout the semester, I created five bins for the Competent Learner Repertoires Assessment (CLRA) and the Verbal Behavior Milestones Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP). These are both common assessment kits in applied behavior analysis that are used to develop behavioral programs for certain skills, such as manding, listening, observing, problem-solving, participating, reading, and writing. For these projects, I created materials to be used in the assessment, and I consolidated all of them into organized bins. Toward the end of my field placement, I was also able to participate in the delivery of these assessments. Previously, assessments could take up to a couple of weeks to complete, but with the use of one of my bins, an assessment could be completed in as little as two days. Overall, working through the assessment guides, creating appropriate materials, and participating in their execution really expanded my knowledge of applied behavior analysis therapy and its goals.

The Virginia Institute of Autism was both an exciting and welcoming field placement site. The staff were wonderful to work with and were very involved in my field placement experience. My first day started immediately with observing one-on-one sessions with an RBT so that I could begin to learn about the foundations of applied behavior analysis. This immediate immersion into the outpatient clinic functions allowed me the opportunity to learn a great deal throughout the semester about ABA principles and their practical application. While the one-hour drive to Charlottesville required waking up fairly early, I was always excited to arrive at the clinic to start my day with the kids. I am extremely grateful that my field placement allowed me the opportunity to work with children in this capacity.

My internship at the Virginia Institute of Autism confirmed to me that I wanted a future career that involved advocating for children from all different walks of life. It was evident from their office functions that they do an excellent job of supporting both their clients and their families, so I wanted to study familial relations for my contribution project. The Virginia Institute of Autism already offered parent support groups pre-pandemic that fostered the mental health of the parents, however, it made me wonder what services the Virginia Institute of Autism may be able to offer the children in the family unit. This sparked my interest in sibling relationships among children with autism. Thus, I researched and created materials for group therapeutic interventions for siblings, which involved mindfulness techniques and self-acceptance activities. Due to the nature of the pandemic, group sessions were not feasible during my internship, however, I hope that these materials prove useful to the Virginia Institute of Autism in the future if they were to start a sibling support group.



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Overall, I feel that the Virginia Institute of Autism has helped prepare me to enter the field of school counseling through my extensive knowledge of autism spectrum disorder, my creation of assessment materials, and my observation of clinical sessions. All of these experiences will make me a more knowledgeable school counselor and advocate for children with autism in the public school system one day.