Ethical and Professional Issues

Behavior analyst certification examination

12 tasks · 22 questions on the exam · BACB Test Content Outline (6th ed.)

This area covers the professional and ethical conduct expected of BACB certificants under the Ethics Code for Behavior Analysts (2020 edition, in force January 1, 2022): its core principles, the risks of unethical conduct, competence, confidentiality, public statements, discontinuing and transitioning services and supervision, multiple relationships, professional skills, cultural humility and responsiveness, personal bias, and legal and regulatory requirements. Questions give a dilemma and ask what the behavior analyst should do FIRST or BEST; the right answer usually protects the client, stays within competence and the law, and addresses the problem directly and documents it.

You should be able to: Given an ethical or professional dilemma, you should be able to name the core principles and Code requirements at stake, the risks to each party, and the action a behavior analyst should take first and best, including how to document it.

Every task: the key point and the trap

E.1 Identify and apply core principles underlying the ethics codes for BACB certificants (e.g., benefit others; treat others with compassion, dignity, and respect; behave with integrity).

The Ethics Code for Behavior Analysts rests on four core principles: benefit others; treat others with compassion, dignity and respect; behave with integrity; and ensure competence. They guide interpretation of every standard and of situations no standard addresses.

Trap: The core principles are not optional ideals beneath the standards; they are the basis for interpreting the standards and for acting when no standard fits exactly.

E.2 Identify the risks to oneself, others, and the profession as a result of engaging in unethical behavior.

To clients and stakeholders: unethical conduct can cause direct harm (ineffective or harmful treatment, exploitation, breaches of privacy), waste time and money, and destroy trust in services.

Trap: The risks of unethical conduct are not limited to the person who committed it; the exam expects you to see harm to clients, the profession and public trust together.

E.3 Develop and maintain competence by engaging in professional development activities (e.g., read literature, seek consultation, establish mentors).

Behavior analysts practice only within the boundaries of their competence, as established by education, training and supervised experience (Code standard 1.05), and take steps to maintain and improve it (1.06).

Trap: Certification does not establish competence in every area; competence is specific to populations, settings and procedures, and a new area requires training or consultation first.

E.4 Identify and comply with requirements for collecting, using, protecting, and disclosing confidential information.

Behavior analysts protect the confidentiality of clients, stakeholders, supervisees and trainees, and recognize that confidentiality extends to all records and communications, in every format (Code standard 2.03).

Trap: Wanting to help or collaborating with a professional does not permit disclosure; without consent or another condition in Code 2.04 (protecting someone from harm, a contractual issue, preventing a crime, a law or court order), confidential information is not shared, even with another provider.

E.5 Identify and comply with requirements for making public statements about professional activities (e.g., social media activity; misrepresentation of professional credentials, behavior analysis, and service outcomes).

Behavior analysts do not make public statements that are false, deceptive, misleading or exaggerated about their work, their credentials, behavior analysis or service outcomes.

Trap: A behavior analyst is responsible for misleading statements made about their services by others, such as an employer's marketing, not only for statements they make themselves.

E.6 Identify the conditions under which services or supervision should be discontinued and apply steps that should be taken when transitioning clients and supervisees to another professional.

The Code (3.15) lists when to consider discontinuing services: the client has met all behavior-change goals; the client is not benefiting; the behavior analyst or their supervisees or trainees are exposed to potentially harmful conditions that cannot reasonably be resolved; the client or a stakeholder requests it; stakeholders do not comply with the intervention despite efforts to address barriers; or services are no longer funded.

Trap: Ending services because they are inconvenient, or ending them abruptly without a plan, is abandonment; even when ending is required, the behavior analyst plans the transition.

E.7 Identify types of and risks associated with multiple relationships, and how to mitigate those risks when they are unavoidable.

A multiple relationship exists when a behavior analyst has a professional role with a person and also another role (personal, financial, social or professional) with that person or someone close to them.

Trap: The key test is risk to the client's welfare and to objectivity, and the first step when one is unavoidable is to disclose and manage it, not to ignore it or end services abruptly.

E.8 Identify and apply interpersonal and other skills (e.g., accepting feedback, listening actively, seeking input, collaborating) to establish and maintain professional relationships.

Professional relationships are built with behavior-analytic interpersonal skills: listening actively (attending, reflecting, summarizing), seeking input, showing empathy and compassion, communicating without jargon, and following through on commitments.

Trap: When a stakeholder disagrees, the best first response is usually to listen and seek their input, not to defend the plan with data or authority.

E.9 Engage in cultural humility in service delivery and professional relationships.

Cultural humility is a lifelong stance of self-reflection and learning: recognizing that one's own culture shapes one's views, approaching others with curiosity rather than assumptions, and accepting that the client and family are experts on their own culture.

Trap: Cultural humility is not knowing facts about a group and applying them to a family; it is asking, listening and adapting to the specific people you serve.

E.10 Apply culturally responsive and inclusive service and supervision activities.

Culturally responsive services adapt assessment, goals, procedures and communication to the client's and family's culture, language, values and context, while keeping them effective and evidence based.

Trap: Culturally responsive does not mean abandoning effective procedures; it means adapting them so they fit the family and remain effective.

E.11 Identify personal biases and how they might interfere with professional activity.

Personal biases are attitudes, preferences and assumptions, explicit or implicit, that can shape judgments about clients, families, colleagues and supervisees.

Trap: Bias is not only conscious prejudice; implicit biases that show up in decisions, detected through data and feedback, are part of what the task covers.

E.12 Identify and apply the legal, regulatory, and practice requirements (e.g., licensure, jurisprudence, funding, certification) relevant to the delivery of behavior-analytic services.

Behavior analysts comply with the legal and regulatory requirements that apply where they work, in addition to the Ethics Code: licensure laws, jurisprudence requirements, and laws about privacy, education records, mandated reporting, and the rights of people with disabilities.

Trap: BACB certification is not a license; where state law requires a license to practice, holding the certification alone does not permit practice.

Key terms

Core principles: Benefit others; treat others with compassion, dignity and respect; behave with integrity; ensure competence.

Stakeholder: A person other than the client affected by and invested in the services, such as a parent, caregiver, teacher or funder.

Scope of competence: The professional activities a behavior analyst can consistently perform with proficiency (Code glossary).

Informed consent: Permission given by a person with the legal right to consent, after the purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, limits of confidentiality and right to withdraw are explained and understood.

Confidentiality: The obligation to protect client information and disclose it only with consent or under the other conditions in Code 2.04.

Multiple relationship: A professional relationship combined with another role with the same person or someone close to them.

Conflict of interest: A situation in which personal interests could compromise professional judgment.

Testimonial: Any solicited or unsolicited recommendation from a client, stakeholder, supervisee or trainee affirming the benefits of a behavior analyst's services; restricted in advertising (5.07, 5.08).

Abandonment: Ending services without a plan, notice or transition that protects the client.

Cultural humility: Ongoing self-reflection and openness to learning from others about their culture and values.

Implicit bias: Attitudes or associations that affect decisions without awareness.

Licensure: Government authorization to practice in a jurisdiction, separate from BACB certification.

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