

The ABCs of ABA

Introduction:

Applied Behavior Analysis or ABA is an evidence-based scientific process which uses the principles of learning and motivation to change behavior. For practical purposes, we refer to behavior as observable actions and skills. ABA techniques are based in behavioral psychology and used to bring about meaningful positive changes in behavior. Many scientific studies have confirmed that using intensive applied behavior analysis techniques with young children with autism significantly improves their cognitive abilities, non-verbal communication, receptive and expressive language skills as well as other adaptive skills. ABA is a widely recognized treatment for autism and has been endorsed by the U.S. Surgeon General and is approved by the FDA.

ABA therapy uses many different techniques and principles and requires a qualified and skilled behavior analyst to customize an intervention program to a child's specific needs. Once a child has been introduced to and responds to certain techniques, they can be applied in a classroom as well as a home setting. This requires caregivers to also learn how to apply these techniques consistently and effectively. Therapists use motivation to understand why a child behaves a certain way and also to change behavior. Early intensive ABA interventions, programs that begin before a child turns 4, involve 25 to 40 hours a week for 1 to 3 years have proven to be most effective for children with autism.

Basic ABA Techniques:

Below is a listing of some key techniques of ABA and how they are applied in various settings. This list serves as an example of the types of techniques used in ABA and is not exhaustive.

- 1) **Reinforcement** – is immediately and consistently delivering a consequence after a certain type of behavior has occurred that increases the likelihood that the behavior will occur again. There are two types of reinforcement:
 - a. **Positive reinforcement** involves getting something desirable immediately after displaying a behavior.
 - b. **Negative reinforcement** involves removing something undesirable after a certain behavior.
- 2) **Punishment** – involves a consequence immediately following an undesirable behavior, and the consequence makes the behavior less likely to occur.
- 3) **Extinction** – is the process of reducing or eliminating unwanted behaviors by removing the positive reinforcers that maintain the undesirable behaviors.

There are several other techniques and principles that are used as part of applied behavior analysis depending on the child and the situation. Here's how an ABA intervention is set up:

- 1) Identify an ABA therapist to work with. Your child's doctor might be able to refer you to therapists or organizations that hire ABA therapists. It is important for you to verify their qualifications and training before beginning an intervention.
- 2) Once you have identified a therapist, s/he will assess your child's needs and create goals for your child and family to work towards.
- 3) The therapist will begin working with your child with a step-by-step and methodical approach to begin to change various behaviors and skills.
- 4) Data collection is a critical part of ABA therapy and ensures an objective and consistent approach. Your therapist will use data points throughout the intervention.
- 5) Family members and caregivers are frequently updated on the child's progress. You may also have an opportunity to go through training with the therapist to ensure that the child's experience is consistent at home.

Finding an ABA therapist:

Finding a qualified professional who can provide ABA therapy is an important step in helping a child with autism. These include licensed clinical psychologists who are trained in ABA as well as board certified behavior analysts with experience working with children with autism.

Before beginning treatment, you should check if:

- 1) Licensed clinical psychologists have the appropriate training in ABA techniques.
- 2) Behavior analysts are credentialed with the Behavior Analyst Certification Board or the Association of Professional Behavior Analysts.
- 3) The therapist will be working one-on-one with your child or in a group setting.
- 4) The therapist is available for an appropriate number of hours per week, depending on your child's needs.
- 5) Your health insurance and/or your school district will pay for or partially pay for treatment.

Remember, finding a qualified therapist will help to ensure that ABA treatment has the best possible outcome for your child.

There are many additional resources you can use to learn more about ABA as well as information about finding a qualified therapist:

- [Lovaas Institute](#)
- [Center for Autism](#)
- [Behavior Babe](#)
- [ABA International](#)
- [Autism Speaks](#)