



Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) in Autism Treatment

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is ABA?

ABA, Applied Behavior Analysis, is a treatment and teaching methodology often prescribed for children with autism. It's based on decades of research into how people learn and what drives behavior. As a treatment, ABA is highly individualized around each child's symptoms, strengths, and specific challenges. ABA meets children where they are on the spectrum, and it can be provided in clinics, homes, schools and community settings.

Who provides ABA to children on the spectrum?

ABA practitioners are called *behavior analysts* or *behavior technicians*. Strong ABA programs are developed and overseen by a graduate-level Board Certified Behavior Analyst® (BACB®), but are often delivered by a credentialed behavior technician. Like other medical and behavioral health providers, they use strategies and procedures from peer-reviewed research and continually evaluate and customize treatment options based on the child's changing needs.

Behavior analysts and technicians develop a treatment plan based on proven ABA strategies and information from the child, their own observations, and insights from the caregivers and families who know the child best. They then coordinate treatment with the child's parents and full care team, often including other therapists (like speech, physical or occupational therapists), psychiatrists, pediatricians, teachers, and others, and develop a set of accountable goals that are meaningful to the family. These practitioners provide the tools and resources caregivers need to continue treatment strategies at home and in the community.

The oldest and largest national non-profit ABA certification board is the Behavior Analyst Certification Board® (BACB®, bacb.com). BACB certification can help caregivers, and even health plans, identify qualified ABA providers.

What developmental improvements can ABA deliver for children with autism?

ABA can improve communication, challenging behaviors, safety skills, daily living skills, sleep, food selectivity and refusal, and many other areas of life functioning. When applied correctly, ABA provides tools to accurately evaluate each child's needs and measure their progress in ways parents can understand—delivering tremendous gains in their long-term quality of life.

Can ABA benefit any child with autism?

Yes. ABA includes a wide range of treatment approaches that are proven to be highly effective for children on the spectrum, regardless of the severity of their symptoms. It can be successful alone or in combination with other therapies such as occupational, speech, and physical therapies. For children with profound autism symptoms, ABA can dramatically reduce dangerous behaviors that put the child and others at risk, like aggression, destruction, and self-harm.

ABA seems so intense! I'm not sure a child as young as mine needs this. Maybe when she's older?

What children experience in their early years shapes the rest of their lives. Professionals agree: early intervention is essential for a child to achieve the most gains. For children with significant autism symptoms, early intervention can be the pivotal driver of increased safety, better health, and the ability to communicate.

Does ABA acknowledge the differences that make a child with autism unique?

Yes. ABA providers work with the child, caregivers, and their circle of support to learn what is important to them over different points in time.

For example:

- » For a toddler, this may be learning to speak, point, or even recognize a family member.
- » For a tween, it may be learning to safely walk in a parking lot or take turns playing video games with friends.
- » For a teenager, it may be learning to navigate social media, practicing healthful hygiene, asking someone on a date, or preparing for a first job interview.

ABA providers celebrate each child's unique identity and personality and incorporate personal and family goals and preferences throughout treatment.

Do ABA providers allow clients and their families to make choices?

Yes. Choice is a fundamental part of an ABA program. Providers incorporate choice throughout the treatment process. This begins at intake, when the provider works with the child and caregivers to set goals important to them. Choice is continually evaluated and included throughout treatment.

Has ABA changed over time?

Yes. Like all science-based healthcare disciplines, ABA is constantly evolving. ABA is just over a half-century old, and its approaches to autism treatment have advanced over time as research has progressed. That means ABA providers today are able to offer more individualized, compassionate, effective care to children than ever before.

Do behavior analysts consider the reasons why a behavior might be happening?

Yes. ABA providers very deliberately consider why children with autism behave the way they do. An entire methodology known as functional behavior assessment is designed around this basic idea. These reasons are incorporated into treatment to ensure a child's needs and wants and the family's preferences are met. ABA focuses on evaluating and changing the child's social environment to meet their needs, instead of considering they are the cause of their challenges.

Is the goal of ABA to make a person more "normal?"

No. Safety, dignity, and personal preference are essential components of any ABA program. ABA providers work directly with children and their caregivers to choose meaningful, personal goals. For example, ABA practitioners use strategies to help children understand existing societal expectations so they and their families can make informed, deliberate choices.

How does ABA align with neurodiversity?

ABA focuses on empowering children with autism to navigate their world and live connected, healthy lives. In fact, it has resulted in so many gains because it scientifically evaluates each child as their own individual as opposed to categorizing them as part of a group. ABA providers teach evidence-based communication skills to children with autism so they can express their wants and needs. Over time, it strengthens their ability to advocate for themselves and ultimately participate in ongoing treatment decisions and personal life choices.

The effectiveness of ABA for the challenges faced by many people with autism is well documented in evidence-based research and meets the rigorous standards of the American Medical Association. For a closer look at some of this important research, visit [TheSpectrum.org](https://www.the-spectrum.org).



Visit [TheSpectrum.org](https://www.the-spectrum.org) for helpful ABA resources and to hear candid conversations between parents of children with autism, autism service providers, BCBAs, and other autism experts.