

What is Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) Therapy?

ABA is a branch of psychology with a large amount of research evidence supporting its effectiveness to improve outcomes for individuals with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). ABA uses techniques to support learning new skills by changing things in the environment that might be interfering with learning. ABA services focus on teaching new skills, similar to therapies such as speech/language or occupational therapy. However, ABA is usually provided in a more intense fashion, ranging from about 10 to 30 hours per week. Progress in response to ABA is carefully monitored over time, and goals and techniques are adjusted as needed to maximize each child's learning and to ensure their unique needs are met.

How many hours per week should my child receive?

The number of hours of ABA that each child receives should be decided by their family after an evaluation has been made by a Board-Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) or trained Psychologist and a recommendation for a number of hours has been made. There are many factors for a family to consider when deciding how many hours their child can participate in ABA. These can include balancing ABA with other opportunities such as school, other therapies, family activities, extracurricular activities, transportation needs, and insurance/cost considerations. ABA is now covered by SoonerCare in Oklahoma and some private insurances companies.

Where is ABA provided?

ABA services can be provided in your home, in a center setting, at school, at daycare, or in the community depending on the willingness of the ABA provider to travel outside of a center setting. There are quite a few ABA clinics in Oklahoma, with new locations opening all the time. Each clinic differs in the service locations offered, so it may help to ask about options available. Unfortunately, there are still parts of the state where there are no ABA providers at this time.

Why should we pursue ABA services?

The intent of ABA is to teach new skills that have not come naturally to the child. It can also be used to reduce behaviors that are interfering with the child participating in learning or social situations. The techniques of ABA can be used to make progress toward a variety of goals, and parents should always be involved in deciding which goals to work on first, based on what is most important to the family. ABA is commonly used with individuals with autism to build skills in social communication, such as improving eye contact and using words and gestures to communicate as well as working on activities of daily living such as dressing, toilet training, or other more advanced skills. ABA supports learning new skills by breaking down desired behavior into smaller parts and allowing the child to combine the smaller skills until they are able to perform more complex skills. Once the targeted skill is learned by the child, the ABA provider can help them learn to keep using that skill in different environments and situations, such as at home and at school.

What about behaviors that interfere with learning or socialization?

ABA is very effective at teaching new behaviors that can replace behaviors that are inappropriate, such as resisting necessary activities like bathing, taking medicine, or going to a new place. It can also be used to reduce behaviors that seem to interfere with the child's ability to participate in learning or social activities. These may be tantrums, aggressive behaviors, or sometimes repetitive movements or fixations. Again, the family should be directly involved in deciding which behaviors they feel should be addressed in this way. Repetitive movements or fixations that are not causing difficulty for the child or family may not need to be reduced.

Is this a mental health therapy? Will it try to change who my child is?

ABA uses principles of behavior to promote learning by teaching new skills. The goal of ABA is to improve learning and the quality of life for a child and their family. This means ABA does not try to change the way individuals with autism think. ABA focuses on behaviors that can be observed, whether through increasing the use of positive skills or reducing behaviors that are interfering with learning skills. The principles of learning and behavior underlying ABA have been shown to be effective in many different settings and applications, including education, parenting, mental and behavioral health, physical health, marketing, and workplaces.

I've heard some people do not support the use of ABA. Why?

The principles of learning and behavior underlying ABA have been studied for decades. Applying the science of ABA to helping people began in the 1960's. So, the research and techniques have been used for a long time. Much like medicine and psychology, the field of ABA has evolved and changed over time as new techniques are developed and researched. In the past, there was more of a focus on reducing unwanted behaviors by using negative consequences. Now, the majority of ABA providers focus on building skills and positive reinforcement. You may come across people who are opposed to ABA for a variety of reasons, but the majority of families who use ABA services have seen great improvement in their child's ability to communicate, play and participate in their community. With that being said, parents should always feel that their child is in a safe environment and should be aware of all services their child is receiving. If there are concerns, then another provider may need to be considered.

More information on ABA is available here:

<http://theautismhelper.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ABA-101-Handouts-The-Autism-Helper.pdf>

<https://www.autismspeaks.org/applied-behavior-analysis>