

Using Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) to Treat Mental Health Needs



What is ABA?

Applied Behavioral Analysis, or ABA, is a therapy that uses a scientific understanding of behavior to manage or change the way individuals act.

Commonly, the goal of ABA is to increase desired behavior by rewarding it; sometimes, ABA also discourages unwanted behavior through negative consequences. For many years, ABA has been applied to work with autistic people and those with developmental delays, but it is increasingly used, especially in schools, with individuals who engage in any behaviors that are considered unwanted, including behaviors connected with social, emotional, and mental health needs.¹

ABA and Mental Health

Many clinicians believe that ABA can be applied to everyone, regardless of their diagnosis. A number of clinical interventions already use reinforcement. Other principles of ABA, such as incidental teaching, can also be easily expanded to a broader population. ABA can be particularly effective in treating mental health needs if particular behaviors - such as aggression or school avoidance - are keeping a child from accessing supports, including instruction at school and therapeutic interventions. ABA can teach safety skills and school readiness skills that allow a child to access their education as well as other forms of therapy.



Benefits of ABA

- **Supported by Research:** ABA is considered an “evidence-based best practice treatment” by the US Surgeon General and the American Psychological Association. More than 20 studies have shown that ABA therapy can improve outcomes for some children. Because ABA is considered “evidence-based,” it is also more likely to be covered by insurance.²
- **Individualized:** ABA starts with an analysis of an individual’s behavior, and can be tailored to fit both the individual and the goals the individual wants to achieve. *(Continued on the next page)*

Sources:

- 1) Autism Speaks, <https://www.autismspeaks.org/applied-behavior-analysis>
- 2) Psychology Today, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/breaking-barriers/201411/answers-beliefs-about-aba-0>

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Benefits of ABA (continued)

- **Goal-Oriented:** ABA can help folks build a variety of different skills, and reach a variety of different goals, including academic skills, social skills, communication and language skills, and more.
- **Collaborative:** ABA can work particularly well for individuals with mental health needs when combined with other treatments, and when ABA therapists work together with an individual's other therapists to treat the whole person.
- **Life-saving:** Many behaviors that come along with autism, as well as mental and behavioral health needs - such as aggression, meltdowns and stimming - can be judged by those who don't understand them as odd, defiant, or threatening. Because of this, some children and young adults who engage in these behaviors - especially people of color, who are already more likely to be perceived as threats - may become targets of discipline, court involvement, and even violence. Because ABA can decrease how often individuals engage in these behaviors, it can help to keep them safe from potentially dangerous consequences.



Drawbacks of ABA

- **Focusing on acting "normal":** Autistic adults who engaged in ABA as kids have argued that "ABA uses rewards and punishments to train autistic people to act non-autistic, [whereas] any therapy should help autistic people get what we want and need, not what other people think we need."³ Behaviors that are normal and helpful for autistic folks are sometimes discouraged.
- **Not attending to emotions:** ABA's focus on observable, measurable behavior means that it does not delve into the emotions behind behavior. For children experiencing strong emotions, this may be confusing or off-putting. ABA can, however, work in concert with therapies that do take a child's emotions into account.
- **Over-teaching compliance:** In a survey by the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network of autistic adults and adults with other developmental and behavioral challenges, many "had undergone treatments in childhood in which they were taught to be compliant without question or were physically restrained in order to 'correct' them. *(Continued on the next page)*

Sources (continued):

3) Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, <https://autisticadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/First-Hand-Perspectives-on-Behavioral-Interventions-for-Autistic-People-and-People-with-other-Developmental-Disabilities.pdf>

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Drawbacks of ABA (continued)

"These treatments ultimately made it more difficult for them to say 'no' as adults, even when that 'no' would protect them in a potentially dangerous situation."⁴

- **A difficult history:** Although ABA has in some ways become "gentler" over the years, it has a history of using "aversives" - unwanted consequences for behavior. A survey in 2008 showed that "25% of ABA therapists found electric shock to be an appropriate aversive to use, and over 33% looked to sensory aversives such as strong odors, unpleasant sounds, or foul-tasting substances."⁵ Many of these methods are not widely used anymore, and many ABA therapists use exclusively positive reinforcement. However, the Ethics Code for Behavior Analysts still allows for the use of restrictive or punishment-based consequences to behavior "after demonstrating that desired results have not been obtained using less intrusive means, or when it is determined... that the risk of harm to the client outweighs the risk associated with the behavior-change intervention."⁶ Check with any potential providers regarding the methods they use to reinforce and/or discourage behavior.

Finding a good ABA provider

- If you determine that ABA is a good fit for your child, look for therapists who:

- Connect with and care about the child
- Are willing to explain the "why" behind what they are doing
- Focus on communication skills and independence
- Let the child lead sometimes

- Ask providers:

- About their experience working with kids that have diagnoses beyond autism. Ask what the work has looked like, and how they've modified ABA to fit the needs of individual children.
- How the provider connects and works with practitioners from different fields. Ask for examples of this collaboration.



The Bottom Line

Parents and caregivers are the experts on their children - only they and their children can weigh the pros and cons of using ABA and make the best decision for their family. Parents and caregivers should ask the hard questions but ultimately make their own decision.

Sources (continued):

4) Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, op. cit.

5) Autistic Self-Advocates Against ABA, <https://autisticselfadvocatesagainstabawordpress.com/2020/04/13/problematic-and-traumatic-why-nobody-needs-aba/>

6) BACB Ethics Code for Behavior Analysts, 2.15 Minimizing Risk of Behavior-Change Interventions