

Frequently asked questions (Autism and ABA)

Q: What is ABA or "ABA therapy"?

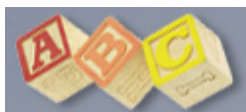
A: Applied behavior analysis or ABA is the application of behavior analytic principles for the improvement of socially significant problems. ABA is based on a long history of sound behavioral research and is characterized by defining the behavior in clear, observable terms; systematic analysis of the problem in question; a clear description of the techniques to be used; clearly demonstrated efficacy; and durability over time (i.e., maintenance) along with generalization to other environments, people, and behaviors. Although ABA has become a popular treatment for autism spectrum disorders (ASDs), this is only one of many areas in which behavior analysis has been successfully applied. Based on a preponderance of scientific evidence, numerous scientific, professional, and government organizations have concluded that [ABA-based procedures](#) represent best practices in treating individuals with ASD and other developmental disabilities. For additional information about ABA and ASD, go to the [Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies \(click Autism\)](#) or go to the [Association for Behavior Analysis Autism Special Interest Group](#).

Q: What is the difference between "Lovaas Therapy" and a "verbal behavior" approach in ABA?

A: The field of ABA as applied for individuals with ASDs has evolved over time, based on published research studies. A sound ABA program should include four components: (1) discrete trial instruction (DTI), (2) chaining procedures, (3) natural environment teaching, and (4) incidental teaching. The component selected at a given time should be based not only on the skill itself (e.g., chaining is used to teach most self-help skills) but also on individual factors, such as one's ability to learn incidentally and one's cognitive level. Discrete trial instruction is implemented when the skill to be taught is "discrete" or has a clear beginning and ending and allows for many practice opportunities.

B.F. Skinner extended operant conditioning to verbal behavior in his book *Verbal Behavior* (1957), thus providing a functional analysis of language, meaning that use of a word can functionally represent more than one thing. These were termed verbal operants (e.g., mands (requests), tacts (labels), echoics, receptive identification, intraverbals, etc.). Thus, the word "apple" can represent a request or mand given a state of deprivation (e.g., hunger) or label when stated in the presence of the item. This led to the application of the analysis of verbal behavior to teaching functional communication to students with ASDs. Incorporating Skinner's analysis of verbal behavior into an ABA program has become more popular in recent years and is based on research. It is important to conceptualize that the use of verbal behavior analysis is not distinctly different from ABA but rather a component of ABA programming. Given that verbal behavior analysis is focused on communication and that this skill deficit is a critical component of an ABA curriculum, a well-rounded, comprehensive ABA educational program should also target readiness to learn, imitation, socialization, academics, daily living skills, motor skills, and recreation/leisure skill areas.

Other areas of advancement in the field of ABA programming for individuals with ASDs in recent years includes the use of errorless teaching with specific error correction strategies, mixing and varying operants (versus mass trailing) in order to enhance motivation during discrete trial instruction, and teaching skills to fluency as



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research suggests that responses that occur quickly or within 2-3 seconds of the instruction are more likely to maintain over time.

A recent research article by Howard et al. (2005) found preschoolers with autism receiving intensive behavior analytic instruction to be superior in language, cognitive, adaptive skills and learning rate compared to students receiving either intensive "eclectic" intervention (1:1 or 1:2 ratio) in public, special education classrooms, and students receiving nonintensive public early intervention programs. This adds to the database of research supporting the effectiveness of applied behavior analysis for instructing individuals with ASDs.

Q:My child has just been diagnosed with an ASD. How can I help my child get ABA services?

A:Given ABA services are sometimes offered in public and private school settings, requesting that ABA services be included in your child's Individual Education Plan (IEP) is often a first step. Many families also set up delivery of ABA services in the home setting under the supervision of private providers or consultants who develop the program. Sometimes families supplement educational services provided in the school setting by also implementing services at home, while other times families implement a full-time (e.g., 30-40 hour) program in the home. In either case, it is important that parents and caregivers identify a competent behavior analyst who can direct and supervise program development. There is generally an assessment phase at the outset involving gaining knowledge of the child through parent/caregiver interviews, record review and direct observations. The Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills (ABLLS) (Sundberg & Partington, 1998) can be used with many learners to identify curricula needs and provide outcome measurement. Note also that ABA is not a cure for ASDs but a means to increase desired skills and behaviors and decrease undesirable ones (e.g., disruptive behavior, aggression, stereotypic behavior). Extensive and ongoing training with direct feedback regarding instructor performance, along with intensive and consistent effort from all team members, are required.

Q:How do I know who to hire?

A:If services are being provided outside of the school setting, a private consultant would likely be hired. Parents and caregivers should look for someone who has an educational and experiential background in applied behavior analysis. Although many people may be qualified to work with children with developmental disabilities, one should have specific training in behavior analysis to provide ABA services. The Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB) certifies practitioners in behavior analysis (Board Certified Behavior Analyst or BCBA and Board Certified Associate Behavior Analyst or BCaBA). All BCBAs and BCaBAs demonstrate minimal competency in behavior analysis by meeting stringent eligibility standards (education and experience in behavior analysis) and passing a certification examination (see below for more information). Not all BCBAs or BCaBAs have direct experience working with individuals with autism spectrum disorders so parents are encouraged to refer to the [Guidelines for Consumers of Applied Behavior Analysis Services to Individuals with Autism](#) for recommendations that help protect consumers and assist them in identifying qualified practitioners. These guidelines are reviewed and updated periodically so they can be a helpful reference. The program consultant should, for example, provide frequent ongoing supervision and training to monitor learner progress and ensure maximum benefit.



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BCBAs and BCaBAs typically develop and oversee home ABA programming, though often do not implement the direct, daily instruction required. Parents/caregivers typically hire instructors or individuals who can be trained in ABA procedures to carry out the day-to-day operations of the program. Local universities (e.g., education and psychology departments) can be a helpful avenue for finding potential instructors, and families often post flyers announcing these openings. [Regional Chapters of the Association for Behavior Analysis](#) and local [Autism Society of America \(ASA\)](#) chapters can also provide networking and support opportunities and connect families with local resources. The book *Behavioral Intervention for Young Children with Autism: A Guide for Parents and Professionals* (Maurice, Green & Luce, 1996) offers guidance in this area and is highly recommended reading in this area.

Q:What is a BCBA/BCABA?

A:BCBAs are individuals trained in behavior analysis who can conduct behavioral assessments (e.g., functional assessment) and develop behavior analytic interventions to increase adaptive behavior and decrease problematic behavior. The BCBA trains caregivers to implement ethical and effective behavioral interventions that are based on sound research. BCBAs generally have a Masters or doctoral degree, over 200 hours of graduate behavior analytic coursework, and a minimum of 750 hours of supervised experience.

BCABAs can also conduct behavioral assessments and train caregivers to implement behavioral interventions. They are supervised by BCBAs and are typically bachelors level individuals with a minimum of 135 hours of behavior analytic coursework and a minimum of 500 hours of supervised experience.

To find a BCBA and/or BCABA in your area, please go to the [Behavior Analyst Certification Board](#) and click "Certificant Registry". Additionally, you can advertise for services in our [classified section](#) (free to parents).

Q:Where can I get more information about ABA and Autism Spectrum Disorders?

A:For more information, please see the following resources:

Additional Readings

- [Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis](#)
- Howard, J.S., Sparkman, C.R., Cohen, H.G., Green, G., & Stanislaw, H. (2005). A comparison of intensive behavior analytic and eclectic treatments for young children with autism. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 26, 359-383.
- Maurice, C. (1993). *Let me hear your voice*. New York: Knopf.
- Maurice, C., Green, G., Luce, S. (Eds.) (1996). *Behavioral intervention for young children with autism*. Texas: Pro-Ed. A hands-on guide which offers chapters on taking a scientific approach, supported inclusion, skill acquisition, etc.
- New York State Department of Health Early Intervention Program (1999). [Clinical practice guideline: Report of the recommendations. Autism/pervasive developmental disabilities. Assessment and intervention for young children \(age 0-3 years\)](#). New York: NYSDOH. This is one of three reference books available in the series.



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- **Sundberg, M. L. & Partington, J. W. (1998). The Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills (ABLLS). Pleasant Hill, CA: Behavior Analysts, Inc.**

Organizations

- **The [Association for Behavior Analysis \(ABA\)](#) - This organization hosts an annual conference and parent attendance is encouraged, including presentations specifically designed to be of interest to parents. There are conference opportunities to converse with experts in the field of autism and challenging behaviors.**
- [Association for Behavior Analysis Autism Special Interest Group](#)
- **The [Association for Science in Autism Treatment \(ASAT\)](#) - This organization's mission is to disseminate only scientifically valid assessment and treatment information.**
- [Autism Society of America \(ASA\)](#) - **See local chapters by connecting from this main website. Most chapters offer support groups and local resources.**
- [Behavior Analyst Certification Board](#)
- [Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies](#)
- [Organization for Autism Research \(OAR\)](#) - **this organization supports research to obtain findings that have practical applications for those with autism, their families and other supporters. A conference is held locally in the fall.**

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