

About Autism

Common questions and answers about
autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and
applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapy



What is **autism spectrum disorder (ASD)**?

Autism is a developmental disorder that affects how people learn, act, and interact with others. People with ASD may have trouble with social interactions, talking, and making eye contact. They might also have very specific interests and do the same actions over and over. Sometimes, they might accidentally hurt themselves. Signs of autism usually appear in early childhood, often before age 3.

Autism spectrum disorder is an umbrella term that includes a diverse range of signs and symptoms and can affect people differently. Some people with autism may require significant, daily support. However, many people with autism can live independent lives with minimal support.



What are the **typical signs and behaviors of autism**?

Autism spectrum disorder looks different from person to person. According to the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), common signs and behaviors of autism may include:



Social challenges:

- Difficulty understanding social cues or nonverbal communication, like facial expressions and gestures
- Challenges with forming and maintaining relationships, including making new friends
- Limited interest in sharing experiences or emotions with others



Certain communication behaviors:

- Delayed speech or language development
- Repetitive use of language, such as repeating words or phrases
- Difficulty initiating or sustaining conversations with others
- Limited use of gestures or facial expressions to communicate



Restricted and repetitive behaviors:

- Engaging in repetitive movements or activities like hand-flapping and rocking
- Becoming upset by changes in routine
- Intense focus on specific topics or objects, often excluding other interests



Sensory sensitivities:

- Hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity to certain sensory inputs, like loud noises and bright lights
- Preference for specific sensory experiences, like certain textures or sounds
- Feelings of anxiety in response to change and new environments



Motor coordination challenges:

- Difficulty with fine or gross motor skills, like tying shoelaces, writing, or riding a bike

How common is **autism**?

Autism is relatively common. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately 1 in 31 children in the United States have autism spectrum disorder. The number of autism diagnoses has increased over the years, partly because people are more aware of it, doctors have better tools for diagnosing it, and the definition of autism has expanded.

What should I do if I suspect my child has autism?

If you think your child has autism, it's important to remember that you are not alone and there are many resources available to support your family. Start by connecting with your child's pediatrician to discuss the diagnostic process and develop a plan. They may have you complete a screening tool like the M-CHAT-R or CAST. These tools help identify children who may need further evaluation and intervention.



M-CHAT-R screening tool: For toddlers

The Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers, Revised (M-CHAT-R) is a parent-report screening tool designed to assess the risk for autism spectrum disorder in young children ages 3 and younger. It consists of 20 questions that parents answer about their child's social, communicative, and play behaviors, which are critical in identifying potential signs of ASD.



CAST screening tool: For older children

The Childhood Autism Spectrum Test (CAST) is a parent questionnaire developed by the Autism Research Centre (ARC) at the University of Cambridge. It can be used to screen for symptoms of autism and social communication difficulties in children.

How is autism diagnosed?

There is no blood test, brain scan, or medical examination to diagnose autism. Instead, a licensed professional, like a pediatrician or child psychologist, can make an accurate diagnosis after observing a child's behavior and evaluating their development and reported symptoms. A timely and accurate diagnosis is crucial for helping a child with autism access the resources they need. To help with the diagnostic process, Action Behavior Centers provides the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule, Second Edition (ADOS-2) and Initial Diagnostic Evaluations (IDEs). Reach out to your local ABC center to learn which assessment services are available in your region.

Research-driven

The ADOS-2 is conducted by trained teammates who meet the publisher's criteria for administering and scoring the tool. Our teammates receive intensive initial training on the ADOS-2 and ongoing training to maintain their clinical skills.



Play-based

Children have fun participating in the ADOS-2. It's not like going to the doctor! During the 40 to 60-minute assessment, our clinicians engage in play and activities tailored to the child's age and developmental abilities.



Scoring

Following the assessment, scores are calculated that indicate how closely the child's behaviors in fundamental areas match autism characteristics. A summary is sent to the child's pediatrician or referring provider to include in their diagnostic process and recommendations.



What is the best treatment for autism?

At Action Behavior Centers, we provide evidence-based applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapy, which is one of the best treatments for autism. Research shows that children who receive intensive ABA therapy (at least 25 hours per week) show more improvement in thinking, daily functioning skills, and communication compared to those who use different types of therapy.

What is applied behavior analysis therapy?

ABA therapy uses behavioral principles to help children with autism develop new skills and make positive changes in their lives. ABA at ABC involves one-on-one sessions where therapists use positive reinforcement to teach and model behaviors. They work with each child to break down new skills into manageable steps. ABA therapy is a fun and interactive experience for children and their families!

During ABA therapy, we prioritize the child's willingness and cooperation to engage in daily therapy activities. We strive to create a supportive and collaborative environment where children and their families can be active participants in the therapy process.

Depending on your child's unique needs, our professionals may recommend a comprehensive or focused approach to ABA therapy:

Comprehensive approach

The comprehensive approach in ABA therapy is a detailed and intensive plan designed to help children in many areas of their development. This approach often includes 20–40 hours of therapy per week and covers a wide range of skills such as talking, socializing, self-care skills, and school readiness.



Focused approach

The focused approach in ABA therapy targets specific behaviors or skills. It is less intensive than the comprehensive approach and usually involves 10–25 hours of therapy per week. During therapy, therapists can concentrate on the child's most important areas, which makes it an effective option for achieving specific goals.



Who provides ABA therapy?

Children with autism thrive when they receive consistent care from experienced, compassionate professionals who love their job. When your child enters our center, they see familiar faces and can build trusting relationships with our staff.

At Action Behavior Centers, each team is structured with one Board Certified Behavior Analyst® (BCBA®) supervisor overseeing a group of nine Registered Behavior Technicians® (RBTs®). The RBTs will deliver therapy as directed by the BCBA for up to eight children. This caseload is much smaller than other ABA therapy centers! We believe it's important to always have an extra set of hands on deck to ensure the highest level of care and attention for the children we serve.



Why is parental involvement important in ABA therapy?

Families and caregivers are vital to the success of any ABA therapy program. At Action Behavior Centers, Family Guidance is a core aspect of every child's care plan. These required twice-a-month sessions are between guardians and their dedicated BCBA to discuss and learn how to apply the strategies used during center hours to everyday life.

When should my child start ABA therapy?

At Action Behavior Centers, many of the children we serve are between 18 months and 8 years old. However, we can support children of all ages in ABC markets that provide At Home Therapy and/or ABC Academy services. We tailor our approach to support children at any stage. Early intervention is critical for children with autism to have the best outcomes. Starting ABA therapy as early as possible can help your child develop essential skills, reach milestones, and build a strong foundation for the future.

Does my child need to be diagnosed with autism before starting ABA therapy?

Yes. A formal autism diagnosis is required before a child can access specialized services like ABA therapy, obtain insurance coverage for therapy, and receive certain school accommodations. We offer the ADOS-2 and IDEs to help families navigate the diagnostic process. Contact your local center to find out which services we offer in your region.

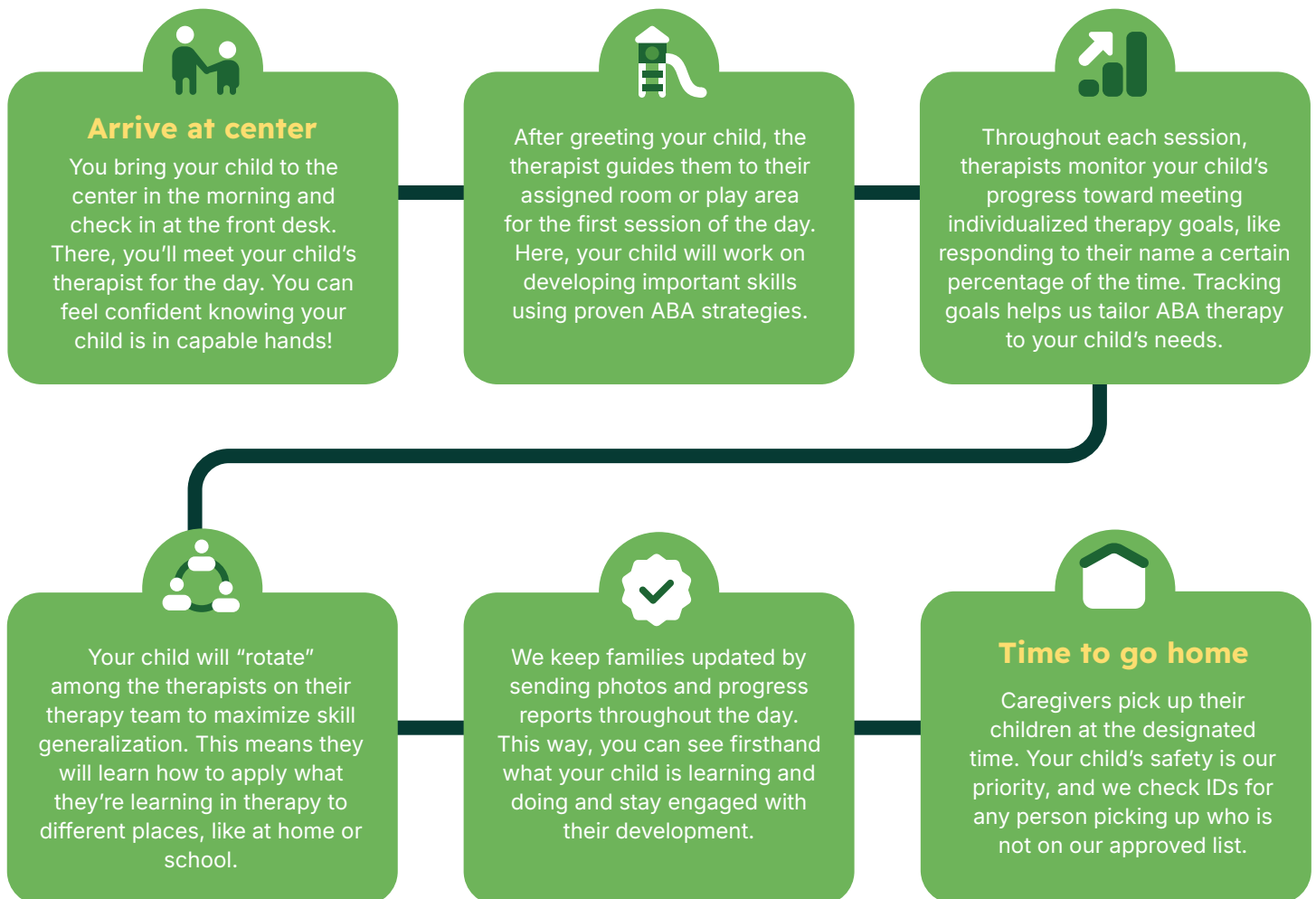


What does a typical day of ABA therapy look like for my child?

At Action Behavior Centers, we create an exciting learning environment. Our center's atmosphere is bright, joyful, and welcoming. It's a place where children can learn, grow, and participate in ABA therapy with trained professionals. We believe in the importance of helping your child learn valuable life skills that can benefit the whole family.

Before therapists begin working on a child's specific goals, they want to make sure the child is comfortable in their new environment. The first few ABA therapy sessions are all about establishing rapport, figuring out a child's favorite toys and games, and what makes them laugh. We also make sure to offer plenty of snacks and treats!

This is what your child's typical day at our center may look like:



What skills are targeted by ABA therapy?

In applied behavior analysis, target behaviors refer to the specific actions or habits that are the focus of therapy. These can be skills we want to teach, such as sharing toys or making eye contact, or behaviors we want to reduce, like aggression or self-injury. The goal of ABA is not only to decrease unwanted behavior but also to teach meaningful alternatives that help children thrive at home, school, and in the community.



ABA therapy can help children grow in many important areas:



Communication skills (verbal language, nonverbal communication)



School readiness skills (imitation, matching, categorizing)



Reduction of certain behaviors (aggression, elopement, self-injury, property destruction)



Social skills (initiating conversation, responding to questions from peers, engaging in interactive play)

Helping your child reach practical goals

No two children with autism are the same. Some autistic children are nonverbal and need help developing communication skills. Others may struggle with repetitive and self-injurious behaviors. Because each child is unique, our BCBAs set individualized goals after discussing family goals and performing a comprehensive assessment of each child's needs.

After evaluating your child, our BCBAs will identify their current strengths and abilities, as well as areas that need skill development. We will also provide strategies for families to apply these skills in real-life situations. Our ABA therapy is tailored to meet your family's needs, and we focus on teaching meaningful and functional skills for everyday life.



Examples of measurable goals for a child in ABA therapy may include:

- Increase the use of spoken words to request a toy from five to 10 times per day
- Initiate playing with peers at least three times during the day
- Identify 10 new common household objects by name
- Follow prompts during a handwashing routine in four out of five opportunities



Why ABA therapy? Does it work?

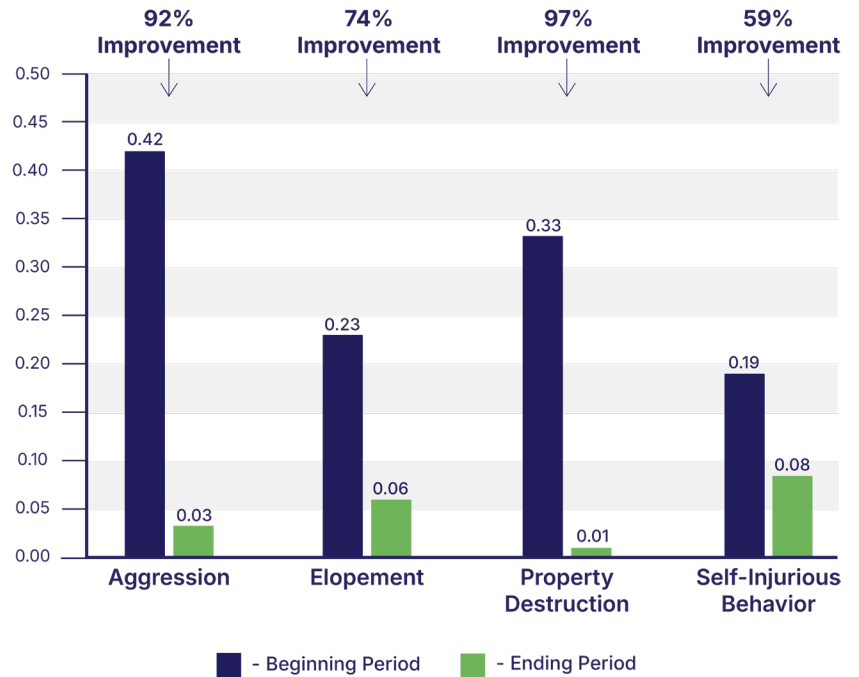
Many research studies have shown that children who receive two or more years of early intensive behavioral intervention (EIBI), including ABA therapy, make significant progress in multiple areas of their lives.¹ ABA therapy continues to be one of the only evidence-based treatments for autism.

In 2021, our clinical team analyzed data from a group of children with autism who received ABA therapy at Action Behavior Centers. Before therapy, these children struggled with certain challenging behaviors, like running away or hurting themselves. After consistent ABA therapy, overall challenging behaviors decreased by 86%!

Scan QR code to learn more about ABC's outcomes research.



Behavior Reduction Percentage
Behavior per Hour (Beginning - vs - Ending Periods)



¹ Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): Early Intervention. National Institutes of Health, April 19, 2021. <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/autism/conditioninfo/treatments/early-intervention>

For more information about ABC visit ActionBehavior.com





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