



Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) Therapy: A Caregiver's Guide to Autism Treatment



**Children featured are not affiliated with ABC services.*

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Introduction

This ebook is for parents, caregivers, and anyone looking for a clear introduction to applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapy. Teachers, childcare providers, and extended family members may also find it helpful to understand the principles behind ABA and how they can support a child's learning in everyday life.



What is ABA therapy?

Applied behavior analysis (ABA) is an evidence-based therapy that supports children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in building meaningful, functional skills for everyday life. Grounded in the science of learning, ABA uses positive reinforcement to help autistic children develop communication, social interaction, and daily living skills, while also addressing behaviors that may impact safety, independence, or participation in daily activities.



What are the goals of ABA?

Current best practices in ABA emphasize an individualized, child-centered approach. Providers focus on creating supportive environments where children feel comfortable and motivated to participate.

ABA therapy is highly personalized. The clinical team works to understand each child's strengths, preferences, and areas where support is needed. Skills are broken down into small, achievable steps and taught in ways that help children use them meaningfully across everyday routines and settings.

Goals are developed to address areas of medical necessity, which include:

- **Communication**, such as expressing needs, using language functionally, and building receptive and expressive skills
- **Social interaction**, such as engaging with others, responding to communication, and developing peer relationships
- **Behaviors** that impact safety or participation, including aggression, self-injury, or other unsafe behaviors

The purpose of ABA is not simply to reduce behaviors. Instead, therapy focuses on teaching effective skills that help children meet their needs in safer, more appropriate ways at home and in the community.

ABA focuses on two closely connected goals

Understanding behavior

ABA looks at why a behavior happens and what a child is trying to communicate, gain, or avoid. By understanding the function of behavior, the BCBA can teach alternative skills that meet the same need in a safer and more effective way.

Teaching new skills

ABA also focuses on teaching meaningful skills that help a child gain independence. These may include skills to build, like communication, and behaviors to reduce, like aggression and self-injury.

These goals work together. As children learn more effective ways to communicate and interact, behaviors that interfere with learning or safety often decrease naturally.

It's important to know that clinicians don't set goals on their own. Families play a major role in deciding what's most meaningful. Maybe mornings are stressful or mealtimes are difficult. Maybe their child wants friends but doesn't know how to start a conversation. Family priorities help guide which skills are taught and which behaviors are focused on from day one.



What does ABA help with?

ABA therapy supports children in building meaningful, functional skills they can use every day.

■ Communication skills

- Verbal language
- Nonverbal communication (gestures, eye contact, pointing)
- Requesting wants and needs

■ Social skills

- Initiating conversation
- Turn-taking
- Building peer relationships
- Sharing

■ Behavior support

- Teaching safer, more effective alternatives to behaviors (aggression, self-injury, property destruction)
- Reducing behaviors that interfere with learning or daily routines



Who provides ABA therapy?

ABA therapy is delivered by a team of trained professionals who work together to support a child's learning and development.



Board Certified Behavior Analysts® (BCBAs®)

Master's-level clinicians who design and oversee ABA treatment. They conduct assessments, develop individualized goals in collaboration with families, and monitor progress.

Registered Behavior Technicians® (RBTs®)

Trained paraprofessionals who provide direct ABA therapy under BCBA supervision. They work closely with children to practice skills, collect data, and support learning during sessions.



Behavioral Therapists (BTs)

In some settings, BTs provide direct therapy services under BCBA supervision. Their role is similar to that of RBTs and may vary based on training requirements and local regulations.

Additional support professionals

ABA teams may also include psychologists, assessment specialists, or other support staff who contribute to evaluations, care coordination, and service delivery.



Steps to begin ABA therapy

Starting ABA therapy can feel overwhelming, especially while families are navigating evaluations, insurance, and school planning. Understanding the steps ahead of time can help make the process more manageable.

Step 1: Understanding diagnosis requirements

Most insurance plans require a formal autism diagnosis before a child can begin ABA therapy. A diagnosis is typically made by a licensed clinician using a combination of standardized tools, clinical observation, and developmental history. Families can seek a comprehensive autism evaluation through qualified healthcare professionals.



[Download the ebook "Getting an Autism Diagnosis: A Step-by-Step Guide for Parents"](#)

Step 2: Preparing to start ABA therapy

While therapy usually cannot begin without a diagnosis for insurance purposes, families can often complete early steps during the evaluation process. These steps may include gathering documentation, confirming insurance benefits, or learning about available therapy options. Planning ahead helps reduce delays later.



Do I need a doctor's referral to begin ABA?

Referral requirements vary by insurance plan. Some families can contact an ABA provider directly, while others may need a referral or prior authorization from a pediatrician or specialist before their child can begin treatment.

Step 3: Navigating insurance coverage

Many private insurance plans cover ABA therapy for children diagnosed with autism, though coverage details vary. Families may need to confirm benefits, authorization requirements, and potential out-of-pocket costs. Because insurance language can be complex, support from insurance specialists or care coordinators can help families understand coverage, timelines, and paperwork.

Related ABC resources

- *Insurance coverage information*
- *Financial FAQs*

Step 4: Intake and assessment

After insurance approval, ABA providers perform an assessment to understand the child's strengths, needs, and learning style. This assessment often includes a parent interview, direct observation of the child, and skill assessment tools, including standardized skills assessments.

ABC offers no-cost online screeners you can complete in just minutes to help you identify your child's risk for autism.



Step 5: Setting goals together

ABA therapy is individualized, which means goals are tailored to each child's unique needs. After assessment, a BCBA identifies a child's current abilities, emerging skills, and areas where support can help the child grow. Then, they set measurable goals for therapy, which may include:

- Increase spoken requests for a preferred item from five to 10 times per day
- Initiate play with peers at least three times during the day
- Reduce instances of self-injury during transitions from five to two times per day
- Identify 10 common household objects by name



Goals are not chosen in isolation. They're built using assessment data and clinical expertise, and they're shaped by family input. As therapy continues, families meet regularly with the BCBA during Family Guidance sessions to review progress, adjust goals, and make sure therapy stays focused on skills that are meaningful and useful in everyday life.

Common ABA strategies

ABA therapy uses individualized teaching to help children learn and use new skills in everyday life. Strategies are selected based on a child's strengths, needs, interests, and learning style, and are adjusted over time as skills develop.

Positive reinforcement

Positive reinforcement is at the heart of ABA and involves providing something meaningful to the child after a desired behavior occurs to increase the likelihood it will happen again. Reinforcement may include praise, access to a preferred activity, or another motivating item.

Discrete Trial Teaching (DTT)

An ABA teaching method that breaks skills into small, manageable steps. Each teaching opportunity includes a clear instruction or prompt, the child's response, and positive reinforcement. This process is repeated until the skill is learned.

Natural Environment Teaching (NET)

Focuses on teaching skills during everyday activities and routines that a child already enjoys. Goals are planned in advance, but learning happens in the moment, such as practicing communication during snack time or turn-taking during play.

Comprehensive vs. Focused ABA

Some children benefit from comprehensive ABA therapy, which involves addressing multiple skill areas and may require higher levels of support and intensity. Other children benefit from focused ABA therapy, where goals are concentrated in a smaller number of areas. The level of care is based not only on the number of goals, but also on the intensity of support a child needs to reach their individualized goals.

A BCBA helps determine the most appropriate treatment approach based on a child's age, intensity of support required, and family priorities.

ABA therapy settings

ABA therapy can take place in different settings, depending on the child's unique needs.



Center-based ABA therapy

A developmentally appropriate environment where young children can work on communication, social, and independence skills. Sessions may include a mix of teaching activities, peer interaction, play, and everyday learning.

In-home ABA therapy

At-home ABA therapy takes place in the child's familiar environment and allows them to practice skills during daily routines such as meals, playtime, and self-care.



School-age programs

Some ABA providers offer continuation of care programs to complement an autistic child's educational journey. These programs teach social skills, flexibility, and executive functioning skills.

What does a typical ABA therapy day look like?

ABA therapy is designed to be supportive and responsive to each child's needs. While every schedule is individualized, many ABA programs follow a predictable daily rhythm that helps children feel comfortable and ready to learn.



Step 1

The day begins with a warm welcome and a predictable transition into the therapy space.



Step 2

Sessions include a mix of structured teaching and natural learning opportunities, targeting communication, social interaction, or behavior support across different settings and routines.



Step 3

Therapists track a child's progress using data, while BCBAs regularly review progress, adjust goals, and guide clinical decision-making.



Step 4

Children will often work with more than one therapist, which helps them use skills with different people and across settings.



Step 5

Families receive regular updates so they can know what their child is learning throughout the day.



Step 6

The day ends with a checkout routine, following clear safety procedures to ensure children are released only to approved caregivers.

How are parents involved?

Families play an essential role in ABA therapy. All ABA programs include regular Family Guidance sessions led by a BCBA. During these sessions, caregivers and clinicians work together to set personalized goals, learn helpful strategies for everyday challenges, and practice tools that reinforce learning outside of therapy. These sessions help ensure skills learned in therapy carry over into daily routines.

[Learn about Family Guidance at ABC](#)



How progress is measured

ABA therapy uses ongoing data collection to track progress and guide clinical decision-making. Each child begins treatment with a comprehensive assessment led by a BCBA, which informs individualized goals in areas such as communication, social skills, and behavior support.

During sessions, therapists collect real-time data on behavior patterns and skill development. BCBAs review this information regularly and adjust goals and teaching strategies as needed. Progress is shared with families using simple graphs or summaries during Family Guidance sessions.

Children learn skills step by step through four learning stages:

1. Acquisition

Therapists introduce a new skill using modeling and positive reinforcement. A child may learn to say “help” instead of crying, with each attempt encouraged and celebrated.

2. Fluency

The child practices the new skill until it becomes smoother and more natural and they can use it accurately with fewer reminders.

3. Generalization

The child begins to use the skill across different settings. They use “help” with teachers at school, siblings at home, or grandparents during visits.

4. Maintenance

After mastering a skill, it’s important to use it regularly. Therapists focus on helping the child strengthen the skill so it becomes part of daily routines.

How do I know that ABA therapy is working?

Progress looks different for every child, but many families begin to notice small, meaningful changes over time. These changes may include:



- Communicating more clearly using words, gestures, pictures, or devices
- Showing fewer unsafe or disruptive behaviors
- Participating more in play or social interactions

It’s normal for progress to happen at different speeds. If the data show that a child’s progress has slowed, the BCBA takes a closer look to understand why. This might include adjusting how a skill is taught, changing the reinforcement, breaking goals into smaller steps, or shifting focus to a different skill area.

Is ABA therapy effective?

ABA therapy is one of the most researched interventions for children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. Decades of research show that, when therapy is individualized and delivered consistently, many children make progress in communication, learning, daily living skills, and behavior.¹ Effectiveness depends on factors like a child's unique needs, when therapy begins, and how skills carry over into everyday routines.

How Action Behavior Centers measures outcomes

At Action Behavior Centers, we conduct outcomes-based research to better understand what supports autistic children and their families most effectively. Our Action Institute for Outcomes Research (AloR) team tracks progress over time using clinical data and family feedback to guide decision-making, improve care quality, and ensure therapy focuses on outcomes that matter in daily life.

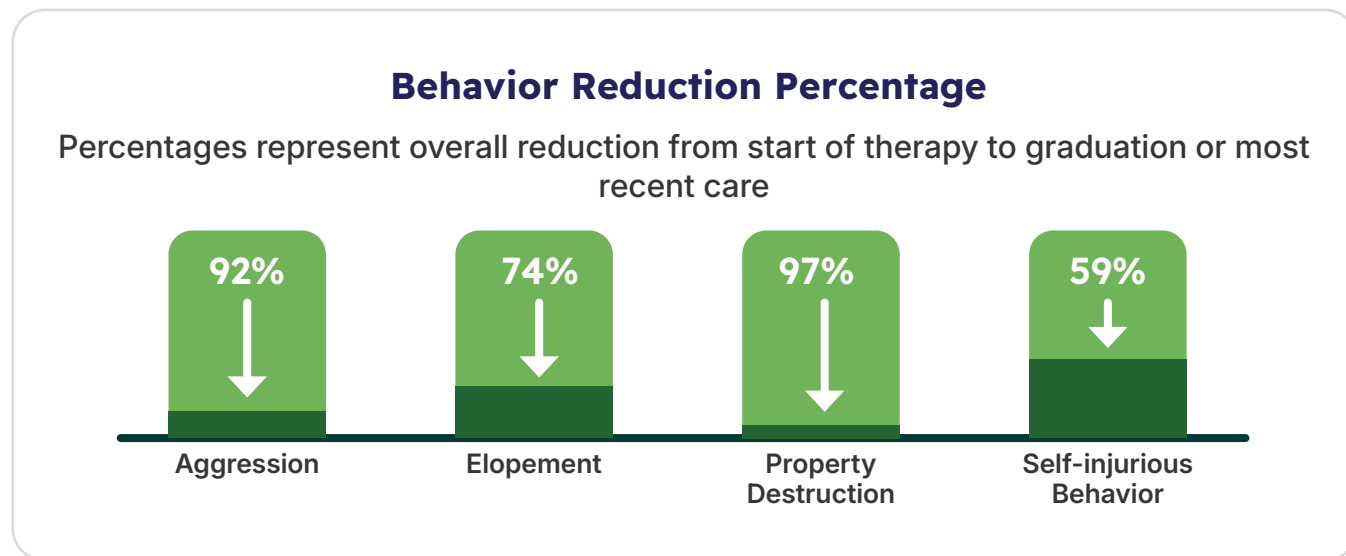


¹ Peters-Scheffer et al., (2011). A Meta-Analytic Study on the Effectiveness of Comprehensive ABA-Based Early Intervention Programs for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 5(11), 60-69. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2010.03.011>

ABA outcomes snapshot

ABA therapy helps reduce challenging behaviors

In a 2021 white paper, ABC followed 20 children ages 2–6 who received ABA therapy for at least one year.²



Results showed:

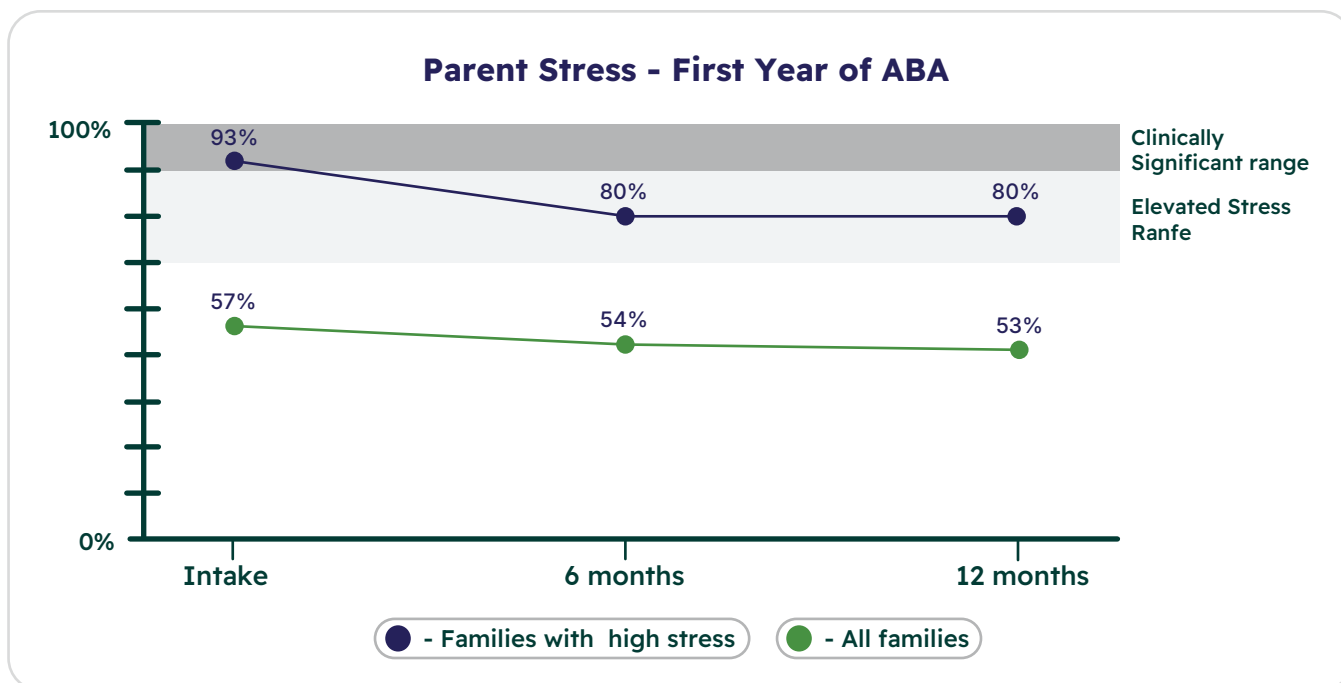
- An 86% decrease in unsafe or challenging behaviors, with most progress happening during the first year of therapy
- Behaviors like aggression and property destruction dropped from the most frequent to the least frequent
- As children learned safer, more effective ways to express themselves, parents reported feeling less overwhelmed

Reduced parenting stress in the first year of therapy

In a study of 298 families, caregivers completed the Parenting Stress Index to indicate their stress levels throughout their child's first year of Early Intensive Behavioral Intervention (EIBI).³

² Mintz et al., (2021). *A longitudinal study of the reduction of challenging behavior through early intensive and comprehensive applied behavior analysis* [White paper]. Action Behavior Centers. <https://www.actionbehavior.com/resource/research>

³ LeBlanc et al., (2024). Parenting stress in the first year of early intensive behavioral intervention for children with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10882-024-09990-4>

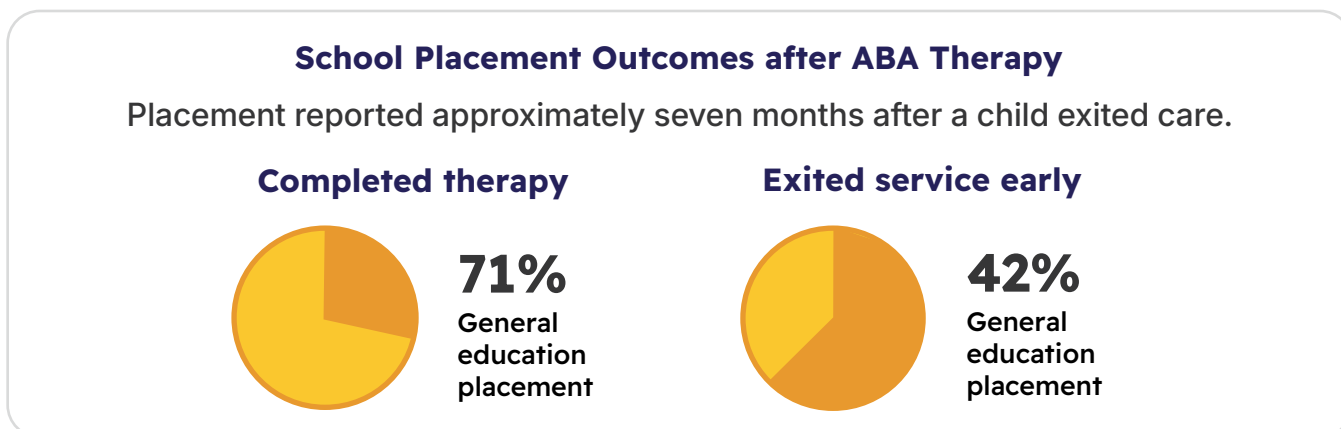


Key findings include:

- Scores dropped from the 57th percentile at the start of therapy to the 53rd after one year
- Families with the highest stress levels experienced the biggest relief
- Regular therapy hours and ongoing communication help families feel supported and confident as their child grows

ABA therapy supports school readiness and placement outcomes

ABC follows up with families about seven months after their child transitions out of care. In a study of 193 families, the ALoR found:⁴



⁴ LeBlanc et al., (2025). School placement outcomes following early intensive behavioral intervention in a routine clinical care setting. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-025-06880-2>

- 71% of children who completed therapy spent most or all of their time in general education settings
- 58% of children who exited services prematurely spent most or all of their time in special education or alternative placements
- Staying in ABA treatment until your child's clinical team recommends graduation can improve readiness for school

How long does ABA therapy last?

Every child's ABA therapy journey is different. Several factors can influence how long a child receives treatment:

Age at the start of therapy: Early intervention is associated with stronger long-term outcomes, especially when services begin between 2 and 5.⁵ Older children can still benefit, though goals and approaches may look different.

Level of support needed: Children who need less support may meet goals more quickly, while children with higher support needs may benefit from longer or more intensive services.

Family involvement: Caregiver participation plays an important role in helping their children reach meaningful outcomes. Family Guidance helps families stay informed and empowered for navigating tough moments.

Therapy intensity: Some children attend 25 to 40 hours of therapy per week, while others attend fewer. While higher intensity can support faster progress, overall duration still depends on each child's needs and goals.⁶

⁵ Zwaigenbaum et al., (2015). Early intervention for children with autism spectrum disorder under 3 years of age: Recommendations for practice and research. *Pediatrics*, 136(Supplement 1), S60–S81. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2014-3667>

⁶ Bacon et al., (2014). Measuring outcome in an early intervention program for toddlers with autism spectrum disorder: use of a curriculum-based assessment. *Autism Research and Treatment*. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2014/964704>

Transitioning from ABA to school

Moving from ABA therapy into school or a community program is an important milestone. Planning ahead can make the transition smoother and less stressful.



How families can support a successful transition:

Talk with your child about the change and acknowledge their feelings

Visit the school or program in advance to build familiarity

Practice simple school routines at home, such as following a schedule or sitting for short activities

Communicate with teachers about your child's learning style, needs, and relevant behaviors

Encourage social connections through playdates or community activities

Related ABC resources

- [From ABA Therapy to School: Transition Tips for Children](#)
- [ABA Therapy vs. Traditional School: What's Best for Your Child?](#)

ABA therapy: Myths vs. facts

Families may hear mixed messages about applied behavior analysis therapy, many of which are based on outdated practices or misunderstandings.

Myth: ABA is all table work.

Fact: While table work can be part of a child's day, children learn through play, movement, sensory activities, and everyday routines.

Myth: ABA tries to make children act “normal.”

Fact: Current best practices in ABA respect each child’s personality and neurodiversity. At ABC, our goal is to help autistic children access the same places and opportunities as their neurotypical peers.

Myth: ABA only focuses on reducing behaviors.

Fact: ABA focuses on teaching new skills. As children learn safer, more effective ways to communicate their needs, challenging behaviors often decrease naturally.

Myth: Therapists make all the decisions.

Fact: BCBAs guide treatment using data, while families play an active role in choosing goals and shaping treatment plans.

Why families choose Action Behavior Centers



Immediate access to care

We help families get started quickly and offer no waitlists, autism evaluation support when needed, and financial assistance for out-of-pocket costs.



Coordinated care

We collaborate with speech, occupational, feeding, and physical therapists who can provide sessions directly in our centers, which minimizes extra transitions and travel.



Evidence-based ABA therapy

Children diagnosed with ASD receive individualized ABA therapy led by BCBAs and delivered by trained RBTs through a compassionate care framework.



Family Guidance

Every care plan includes regular Family Guidance sessions led by a BCBA, giving parents practical strategies they can use during therapy and in daily routines at home.



School readiness support

Our center-based service line helps children build the skills they need for school, and ABC Academy continues that support by bridging the gap between therapy and the classroom.

[Explore ABC locations](#)



Outcomes research team

The Action Institute for Outcomes Research (AloR) measures how ABA therapy impacts children and families and uses this data to improve care.

[Learn more about
ABA therapy](#)

[Get started with care](#)



Resources

Checklist: What to ask during your ABA center tour

- How are therapy goals chosen and updated?
- What is the typical BCBA caseload?
- How do you ensure children feel safe and supported?
- How often will I receive progress updates?
- How do you coordinate with schools or other therapists?
- What does a typical day look like?
- What training do therapists receive?
- How are families involved in the process?

Continue learning



What Is Pairing in ABA Therapy?



What To Ask When Choosing an ABA Therapy Program



How ABA Therapy Supports Social Skills

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