



## **Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA): What It Is and What to Expect**

### ***What is Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)?***

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is a field of study that focuses on the application of the principles, methods, and procedures of the science of behavior, which are the result of years of research of human development and behavior. Applied Behavior Analysis studies the interactions between people and the environment to determine the effects the environment has on a person's behavior. In clinical practice, ABA is used to teach new skills (i.e., social skills, play skills, communication skills, independent living skills, safety skills, etc.), improve performance in already acquired skills (i.e., faster task completion, more accurate responding, etc.), and decrease unwanted and challenging behaviors such as aggression, stereotypy, self-injurious behavior, task refusal, and other socially inappropriate behaviors.

### ***Intake Appointment***

At the intake appointment, an interview will be conducted with the caregivers to obtain detailed information about the referral concerns and your child's developmental, medical, and family history. At the end of the intake appointment, the psychologist will discuss clinical impressions regarding diagnosis(es) and initial treatment recommendations. If ABA therapy is recommended for your child, your child will be scheduled for an ABA assessment as soon as the schedule permits.

### ***ABA Assessment***

A Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) will conduct a skills assessment with your child to identify areas of strength as well as any skill deficits that are present. These assessments focus on all areas of development including language, social, self-help, fine/gross motor and play skills. Additionally, the behavior analyst will conduct a functional assessment to determine the hypothesized function of any problem behavior which may be present. A functional assessment consists of observing your child in a variety of contrived situations (e.g., command situations, denial of preferred activities or items, denial of parent attention/boredom, play situation, etc.). You also may be asked to complete several behavior rating scales which will further provide the behavior analyst with helpful data regarding your child's problem behavior. The results of both the skills assessment and functional assessment are used to inform future treatment goals as well as behavior interventions. While most initial ABA assessments can be completed in two 2-hour sessions, the duration of the assessment period may vary for each child depending on individualized factors.

***Treatment Plan Development:*** The results of the skills assessment provide the necessary information to generate an individual treatment plan (ITP) for your child that will address

the referral concerns. Additionally, the BCBA will develop a behavior treatment plan (BTP), if applicable, which will outline proactive and reactive strategies to address any behavior concerns that were identified in assessment. The BCBA will discuss with you the proposed treatment plans prior to treatment. Treatment is always a collaborative process and your input is very important! Please ask as many questions that you may have and feel free to provide your own thoughts, opinions, insights, and concerns as the treatment plan is reviewed. Because therapy is always active, the treatment plan is fluid and may change as treatment progresses based on life circumstances, progress, and new information.

***Scheduling Therapy:*** Following the initial ABA Assessment, the BCBA will make a recommendation for frequency of ABA therapy based on their clinical discretion for what is medically necessary to help address your child's individual concerns. The BCBA will also recommend what treatment settings (e.g. clinic, school, home, community) are most appropriate to address the proposed treatment goals. From these recommendations, a proposed treatment schedule will be discussed with you. Several factors impact the frequency of scheduled services as well as the service start date including staffing availability, parent availability, payment/insurance coverage, etc. Once an agreed upon schedule is established, your child will begin treatment.

***ABA Therapy Sessions:*** Therapy typically occurs in the clinic but will also take place in home, school or community locations wherever is most appropriate to address your child's individual treatment goals. A typical therapy session in the clinic consists of alternating between table teaching and Natural Environment Teaching (NET); however, therapy sessions can vary from child to child based on their individual needs. Additionally, behavioral strategies are implemented both proactively and reactively throughout each session in accordance with your child's behavior treatment plan in an effort to decrease problem behavior. Table teaching sessions and NET sessions are described in more detail below:

***Discrete Trial Training (DTT)*** sessions most often include: language/communication (i.e., receptively identifying items or pictures, labeling items, answering questions, etc.), matching items, sorting items, academic tasks (i.e., writing, math, and reading), motor imitation, and attending skills.

***Natural Environment Teaching (NET)*** usually consists of incidental teaching and therapist contrived learning opportunities to work on many skill areas including social skills, language/communication skills, play skills, and independent living skills. Incidental teaching is a child-initiated teaching interaction. Many of the skills that are initially taught during a table session will also be targeted during NET sessions once they have been mastered, in order to ensure that mastered skills can be performed in a variety of environments and with a variety of people.

**Caregiver Training:** During ABA treatment, it is truly the child's parents and caregivers that are the "change-agents" and primary therapists for the child's treatment. Therefore, it is vital that as a caregiver, you are an integral and regular part of services. You will be taught various strategies to use to reduce behavior problems and to establish and maintain your child's previously acquired skills in the home environment. You will collaborate with the behavior analyst and other important stakeholders in your child's life to continually develop, apply, and modify interventions that are used.

**Collaboration with Other Caregivers and/or Agencies:** If your child is in school and/or is receiving services from other agencies (e.g., speech therapy, psychiatry, etc.), then your child's BCBA will likely request permission to collaborate with such service providers. This collaboration is important because behavior change is most successful when there is consistency in the application of interventions across caregivers and settings.

**Data Collection:** A very important part of ABA therapy is ongoing data collection. Data collection is necessary to determine what current behavior levels are at the beginning of treatment and to assess progress and the usefulness of interventions as treatment proceeds. We will do some data collection during session time in the clinic; however, you will also be asked to collect ongoing data outside of therapy time. Some examples of data collection may include making tally marks whenever your child exhibits a specific behavior, recording possible triggers and reinforcers to behavioral events, or providing descriptive information about certain routines (e.g., bedtime, meals, etc.) as they occur. Because we cannot be with you or your child throughout your child's typical routines outside of therapy, you and any other caregivers must be our eyes and ears. Otherwise, we would be missing a large piece of information that is necessary to understand the behavior problems you are encountering. Ongoing data collection and analysis is one of the most helpful ways to determine if the treatment plan is working and what areas need to be modified and when.

**Treatment Progress and Discharge:** ABA therapy is often provided from many months to several years depending on the child's individualized concerns and how well they respond to treatment. Each child undergoes a re-evaluation from the BCBA every 6 months of treatment to identify progress on therapy goals and to help inform the future direction of treatment. The goal of ABA therapy is to help each child to achieve their fullest potential and to systematically fade therapy services over time so that the child may function more independently with their newly acquired skillset. Fading of ABA therapy services and discharge planning is a team decision and will be an ongoing discussion between you and your child's BCBA throughout treatment.

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