Family Education Sheet

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)

childrenshospital.org/services/autism-spectrum-center

Your child's provider may recommend applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapy if your child has been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Key points

- Applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapy is a way to help children who have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).
- There are many different agencies that provide ABA therapy.
- ABA therapy is usually covered by health insurance.

What is ABA and why does my child need it?

There is currently no "cure" for ASD. But our understanding of ASD is growing every day. Early therapy can be very useful in helping children with ASD build new skills.

ABA is a kind of therapy that teaches children developmental, social and language skills. ABA can also help people with ASD work on changing behaviors that may make it difficult to do activities of daily life and learning. ABA therapy can happen at a therapy center or in the home.

How do I know if ABA is right for my child?

Your child's Autism Healthcare team will usually recommend ABA if they think it could be helpful for your child.

ABA is widely recommended by healthcare providers and education professionals because of the years of research and data that support the positive effects of ABA. ABA may be helpful if your child:

- Is showing signs of challenging or unsafe behaviors
- Has a hard time communicating
- Has trouble with adaptive skills like getting dressed, brushing teeth, going to the bathroom, etc.

Who decides what kind of therapy my child needs?

A **Board-Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA)** will do an observation and assessment of your child. This will be used to create your child's treatment plan. Treatment plans include goals that are set just for your child and the number of hours of therapy your child needs each week in order to meet these goals.

BCBAs oversee treatment plans and act as supervisors. **Behavior therapists** are the people who actually do the therapy outlined in the plan on a regular basis.

How do I choose an ABA provider for my child?

It's important to ask questions when choosing an ABA provider to see if they're likely to be a good fit for working with your child and your family. Here are some good questions to get you started:

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What does an ABA session usually look like?

An ABA session will look different from child to child and agency to agency. Ask the ABA provider what one of the sessions through their agency usually looks like.

How long until we can start regular services?

It usually takes some time to find a BCBA and a therapist to work with your child. Each agency has different wait times. These wait times depend on staff availability, scheduling and insurance authorization.

Will my child have the same therapist for every session?

Your child might be signed up with a few different therapists if they're having many hours of ABA a week. Ask the ABA provider how they assign and organize their therapists' caseloads.

It's common to have behavior therapists change. Children with ASD can be sensitive to changes in their routine. Make sure there is a plan in place if your child's therapist needs to change.

How are Caregivers involved in ABA?

Caregiver involvement (taking part) and training is an important and necessary part of ABA therapy. The child is more likely to succeed when parents are involved.

Remember: You are the expert when it comes to your child and the BCBA is the expert on ABA. You should work as a team to support your child in their daily life.

You should be given a clear understanding during ABA therapy sessions about what is being done and why. You should be given the tools and strategies to support your child outside of the therapy sessions. This could involve:

- Meetings or trainings
- Trainings
- Watching your child's therapy sessions
- Being part of the session

Make sure parent training is written into your child's treatment plan. Talk with your child's BCBA about how to include training opportunities for you and your family.

Does insurance cover ABA?

If your child is diagnosed with ASD, it is very uncommon for insurance not to cover ABA services. If your child has MassHealth, ABA services are covered up to the age of 21. Proper documentation is needed.

If you do run into issues with insurance coverage, contact the Autism Insurance Resource Center:

Autism Insurance Resource Center (AIRC)

massairc.org

(774) 455-4056 | info@disabilityinfo.org

What do I need for insurance authorization?

All ABA provider agencies will need documentation of your child's diagnosis showing the need for ABA in order to get approval for ABA services from your insurance. You'll need to send required documents to the agency you choose to work with.

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Services usually **cannot start** until insurance authorization has been approved. You'll need to work closely on the following items with the ABA agency you've chosen to make sure this happens in a timely manner:

- A **letter of medical necessity** or **prescription** for ABA from the provider who made the diagnosis of ASD.
- A **diagnostic clinical report** that states the diagnosis and how it was made.
- The results of **standardized tests.** These can include the ADOS, CARS or other test(s) listed by insurance or ABA agencies.
  - **Note:** Standardized testing is **optional.** It's not required for making a diagnosis of ASD. Your child **is still eligible** for ABA if they have a diagnosis even if they haven't completed testing. If standardized testing was not used, your child's clinical report must detail the diagnostic criteria your child has met to receive the ASD diagnosis.
- The **most recent physical exam**
- **Copies of your child's insurance card.**

For more information about ABA:

- Talk with your child's doctor
- Visit the CDC's website
- Autism Speaks
- National Autism Society
- KidsHealth from Nemours
- Autism Insurance Resource Center (AIRC)
- Insurance Resource Center for Autism and Behavioral Health

Contact us

Contact the Autism Spectrum Center at (617) 355-7493 or email autismcenter@childrens.harvard.edu.

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