



**GBC Autism Services**  
*helping transform lives®*



# AN ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO AUTISM AND ABA

Understanding the Ins and Outs  
of Applied Behavior Analysis Therapy



You've probably heard of ABA therapy, but to truly understand what it is and how it can benefit those with autism, you need to get beyond the online discussions. This guide will explain what autism is, what ABA therapy is, and how ABA therapy can help those with autism live more independent, fulfilling lives.

## Autism Spectrum Disorder

[Autism spectrum disorder](#) (ASD) refers to a group of complex developmental disabilities characterized by repetitive patterns of behavior and difficulties with social communication and interaction. People with autism have trouble understanding what other people think and feel, which, in turn, makes it hard for them to express themselves.

Autism is known as a "spectrum" disorder because there is wide variation in the type and severity of symptoms people experience. The learning, thinking, and problem-solving abilities of people with autism can range from gifted to profoundly challenged.



People of any race, ethnicity, or socio-economic background can have autism, but it is four times more common in boys than in girls.

## Autism in Early Childhood

According to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, symptoms of autism usually appear [before a child turns 3 years of age](#). Some common symptoms include:

- Trouble relating to others or not having an interest in other people at all
- Making little or inconsistent eye contact
- Tending not to look at or listen to people
- Rarely sharing enjoyment of objects or activities by pointing or showing things to others
- Failing to, or being slow to, respond to someone calling their name or to other verbal attempts to gain attention
- Having difficulties with the back and forth of conversation
- Trouble understanding other people's feelings or talking about their own feelings
- Repeating or echoing words or phrases said to them, or in place of normal language
- Trouble expressing their needs using typical words or motions
- Repeating actions over and over again
- Trouble adapting when a routine changes
- Unusual reactions to the way things smell, taste, look, feel, or sound
- Displaying facial expressions, movements, and gestures that do not match what is being said
- Being able to learn things in detail and remember information for long periods of time

Diagnosing ASD in children is usually a two-step process. First is a general developmental screening during well-child checkups. The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) recommends all children be screened for developmental delays at their 9-, 18-, and 30-month well-child visits and [specifically for autism](#) at their 18- and 24-month well-child visits. Children who show developmental problems during this screening process will be referred for the second stage of evaluation.

Per the Centers for Disease Control, stage two involves [additional evaluation](#) with a team of doctors and other health professionals who are experienced in diagnosing ASD. This evaluation may cover cognitive level or thinking skills, language abilities, and age-appropriate skills needed to complete daily activities independently. The outcome of stage two will result in a formal diagnosis and recommendations for treatment.

## Types of Therapies for Autism

There are a variety of treatments for autism, but the most common are behavior and communication approaches, which provide structure, direction, and organization for the child, in addition to family participation.



Within this category, you will find:

- [Applied Behavior Analysis](#) (ABA) Therapy - which encourages positive behaviors and decreases occurrences of problematic behaviors to improve a variety of skills.
- [Early Intervention](#) - which should typically occur around the age 2 or 3, provides a greater opportunity for learning and development.
- [Occupational Therapy](#) (OT) - increases sensory regulation and teaches skills that help a person live as independently as possible.
- [Social Skills Training](#) - which teaches children the skills they need to interact with others, including conversation and problem-solving skills.
- [Speech and Language Therapy](#) - which helps to improve the person's communication skills.

## ABA Therapy

Applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapy is widely recognized as the most effective, evidence-based treatment for autism and is [endorsed by the U.S. Surgeon General](#) and the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#). It offers research-based principles to influence behavior change in a meaningful way. ABA has a large research base and its methods have been proven to improve positive behaviors for its patients.



### A for Applied

[“Applied”](#) means practice, rather than research or philosophy. When we take the research principles that have been proven to work and use those strategies to help our patients improve their lives, we are applying those principles and strategies in meaningful ways.



### B for Behavior

[Behavior](#) in ABA stands for anything that a living organism, human or animal, does that can be observed by others. So often we think of behavior and associate negative behaviors with that term.

When we say “behavior” in ABA, we can be discussing negative or difficult behaviors, like tantrums, yelling, swearing, stealing, but we can also be focusing on positive behaviors, like sharing, talking, waving good-bye, making a purchase. Each of these are things an outsider can observe happening. If we can see it, then we can take data on it.

It may seem odd to use the word “behavior” when talking about learning to talk, play, and live as a complex social animal, but to a behavior analyst all these can be taught, as long as there are intact brain functions to learn and practice the skills.





## A for Analysis

[Analysis](#) means that we are a science, we use data to make our decisions, and we do this continually as we work with you. When we work with your child we will take data, review the data for trends (increases, decreases, stability, or instability), and make decisions that are based on the data we observe. Most BCBAs love data. We love looking at graphs and making data-based decisions that will help your child learn more.

Put it all together and what you have is ABA. ABA is about teaching our patients to learn new skills, replace behaviors of concern with more socially appropriate behaviors, and focusing on improving and increasing behaviors that will be meaningful to the patient and society.

# How ABA Therapy Works

ABA [involves several phases](#), allowing for an approach that is tailored to your child's specific needs.

### ► CONSULTATION AND ASSESSMENT

When consulting with a therapist trained in ABA, your child will first undergo a functional behavior assessment (FBA). During this assessment, the therapist will ask about your child's strengths and challenges, interact with your child to make observations about their behavior, communication level, and skills, and possibly visit your home and your child's school to observe your child's behavior during typical daily activities.

### ► FORMAL PLAN

A formal plan will be developed from the therapist's observations from the initial consultation. This plan should align with your child's unique needs and include concrete treatment goals, which usually relate to reducing problematic or harmful behaviors and increasing or improving other skills.

Caregivers, teachers, and the therapist will also be given specific strategies to use to achieve treatment goals. This helps to keep everyone who works with your child on the same page.

### ► CAREGIVER TRAINING

ABA relies on parents and caregivers to help reinforce desired behaviors outside of therapy, so the therapist will teach you and your child's teachers strategies that will help to reinforce the work your child does in therapy, along with types of reinforcement that are less effective and should be avoided.

### ► FREQUENT EVALUATION

As your child continues therapy, the therapist will try to uncover the causes of certain behaviors and

help your child change or improve them. The therapist's approach may change based on how your child responds to certain interventions, which will be monitored closely. Strategies will be analyzed to determine which are working and where your child may benefit from different treatment tactics.

## Benefits of ABA Therapy

ABA has been the subject of many studies, and each has proven ABA can help children with autism spectrum disorder learn new behaviors. This is because therapists modify the child's social and emotional behavior through ABA therapy. From better social skills to increased intellectual abilities, ABA can help children adjust to normal life.

With early ABA therapy, children are able to attain a faster recovery rate, improving in areas like non-verbal expression, imitation, matching, expressive language, and receptive language.

Additionally, children perform better in school and are more likely to remain in school when they receive ABA therapy. Many parents notice less frustration and better communication after ABA treatments, and problem behaviors often start to go away as the therapy continues.

Children who receive ongoing ABA therapy are more likely to overcome many of the symptoms of ASD. More intervention now can lead to more age-appropriate skills later, allowing an easier transition into the mainstream.



**FASTER RECOVERY RATE**



**BETTER COMMUNICATION**



**PERFORM BETTER IN SCHOOL**



**OVERCOME SYMPTOMS**



# What to Expect in a Typical ABA Therapy Session

ABA therapy appointments are customized for each child, so there is not a “typical” therapy appointment example. However, most appointments include two types of training: [Discrete Trial Training](#) (DTT) and [Natural Environment Training](#) (or Teaching) (NET). These methods are meant to help your child master needed skills and apply them in real-life situations.

DTT is a more formal interaction where a therapist works with your child at a tabletop. Each opportunity to teach your child a skill has a discrete beginning and end. DTT helps your child master skills more quickly and efficiently because the child receives reinforcement after every trial.

NET therapy takes a skill learned during DTT and applies it to real-life situations where they need to interact with family, peers, or others. NET helps the child more easily generalize the skills so he or she can use them outside of therapy.

## Learn More About ABA

If you still have questions about ABA or just want a better understanding of how ABA actually works, contact GBC Autism Services. We use person-centered techniques that lead to the best possible outcomes for the patient because patients are the central focus of all we do.

We approach each patient as a unique opportunity to transform not only that individual but also those who interact with that patient including parents, siblings, teachers, and employers.

[Reach out today](#)  
for a cost-free consultation!

