

## A Look at Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA)

Note: Siobhan Nelson, an undergraduate working with our Center at UCLA, indicated that she was involved with a program that used ABA and wanted to look at what the literature had to say. The following is a brief summary of what she concluded (with some edits).

### What is ABA?

- Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) is a form of individual therapy based on behaviorism, the theory which posits that individuals' lives can be improved through behavioral changes, and treatment will be most effective if the behavior itself is the focus of the intervention.
- Over time, scientists have found that some behavior is the product of the situation that immediately follows it, or the consequence, with positive consequences reinforcing a certain behavior, and negative consequences discouraging it.
- Based on this, practitioners of ABA utilize techniques of reinforcement and punishment to teach individuals more productive ways of behaving.

### ABA and Autism

- Individuals with autism spectrum disorder, a neurodevelopmental disability with social impairment and restrictive and repetitive behaviors and interests as its hallmarks, often display maladaptive behaviors that inhibit them from fully participating in society and daily life.
- To date, ABA is known as one of the strongest evidence-based treatments for autism, especially amongst pediatric population.
- Throughout history, ABA has been used to target and either eliminate or reinforce specific behaviors in order to reduce self harm and dangerous behaviors and to increase independence and communication among those with autism.
- Some critics have questioned the validity of this treatment, arguing against the rigidity and intensity of ABA and that autistic children should not be punished for their behaviors and that society must become more accepting toward autistic traits; some even argue against the characterization of autism as a pathological disorder. The controversy raises the questions: Is ABA as abusive as some critics claim? For whom does ABA have tangible benefits?

### ABA for High vs Low Functioning Autistic Children

- Historically, ABA treatment has largely been focused on preventing maladaptive behaviors and fostering basic hygiene and life skills in children with low functioning autism. For example, Al-Khateeb (2014) reported that compared to a control group, children on the end of the autism spectrum in an ABA group showed larger gains in self care skills. Orinstein et al. (2014) compared children with autism to those who had previously been diagnosed but no longer met the criteria and found that these children had received more ABA, as well as earlier parent concern, earlier referrals to specialists, and earlier and more intensive intervention.
- Alandy-dy (2019) argues that ABA, especially when paired with other elements such as cognitive behavioral therapy and parent participation in treatment, is successful in discouraging problematic behavior and building foundational skills for children with high functioning autism.

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\*The material in this document was produced by Siobhan Nelson as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2025.

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- Focusing on high functioning individuals on the ASD, Thomeer et al (2019) describes how discouragement or reinforcement of certain behaviors led to greater social and academic skills, and a decrease in problem behaviors. These researchers also suggest that video modeling (e.g., watching a social interaction occur) can also foster social skill development in high functioning children.
- For high functioning children, ABA treatments that focus on social skill development and self chosen rewards in combination with CBT techniques have proven most effective in school settings (Hoffman, 2013).
- In general, available research offers a perspective as to how those with low functioning and high functioning autism alike have been involved with ABA treatment. Clearly, more research is needed, especially using methods that allow for causal conclusions about the treatment and studies of what role ABA can best play for high functioning individuals.

### **Stated Pros of ABA**

- When used to promote language development and self care skills, ABA brings about positive effects that enhance the lives of patients and allow them to participate as functioning members of society.
- In a pilot study, Artoni et al. (2017) found technology-enhanced ABA intervention effective in enhancing communication and expression skills in children with low functioning autism.
- Studies also have demonstrated that ABA not only positively impacts patients themselves, but also their caregivers and parents, who were pleased to experience their children's improvement in daily functioning and communication, subsequently experiencing a more pleasant and harmonious family environment (McPhelmy and Dillenburger, 2013).
- ABA is reported as beneficial when applied to different mental disorders and disabilities (e.g., is used to improve the language skills of those with speech disorders, rebuild functional and cognitive skills for those with traumatic brain injuries, and eliminate behaviors that are personally distressing and impairing for those with ADHD and OCD (Yellow Bus ABA, 2024).
- ABA that utilizes intrinsic motivation enforces positive behavior and rewards children by engaging their initial, naturally occurring interests in their environment, explaining the reasons pursuing desired activities and behaviors, and reducing frustrations (Baker, 2012).

### **Stated Cons of ABA**

- ABA attempts to modify traits that many autistic individuals view as different yet valuable forms of communication, and as quirky but harmless facets of their unique personalities, which are integral to who they are.
- Many members of the neurodivergent community and autistic self advocates view the treatment as too rigid, or even abusive.
- Additionally, members of the neurodiversity movement reject the medical model of autism, seeing autism as a neutral neurological difference rather than a deficit to be treated (Kirkham, 2017).
- Self stimulation (stimming) and other autistic traits that are often seen as misbehavior by neurotypical adults and discouraged via ABA are actually a constructive form of communication, and should not be suppressed (Kirkham, 2017).

## A Few Resources for Schools

When implemented at the school level to address autism, ABA practices usually are carried out by trained therapists with a plan for teachers to follow-up to promote development and positive behavior. Teachers and student support staff can provide autistic students opportunities to interact, receive feedback, use communication devices, and observe the prosocial behavior of other students, as well as utilize reward systems for positive behavior

For classroom strategies in working with students on the Autistic Spectrum, see

- >[Strategies for autism in the classroom](#) (2025)
- >[Effective Classroom Strategies for Teaching Students with Autism](#) (2024)
- >[15 Strategies for Autistic Learners in the Classroom](#) (2020)
- >[Evidence-based classroom strategies for reducing anxiety in primary aged children with high-functioning autism](#) (2013)
- >[Creating an Inclusive Classroom Environment](#) (2024)
- >[School Community Tool Kit](#) from the [autismspeaks.org](http://autismspeaks.org)

For more resources, see the Center’s Quick Find on

- >[Educating Children with Autism](#)

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