

Family Education Sheet

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



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Until every child is well™

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If your child has been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), your child's doctor may recommend applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapy.

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 gain new skills.

ABA is a kind of therapy teaches children developmental, social and language skills. ABA can also help people with ASD work on behaviors that get in the way of daily life and learning.

ABA services can be done in many different ways and places. Most programs are center-based (at a therapy center) or home-based (a therapist works with your child at home). Some programs offer services in both of these places.

Who decides what kind of therapy my child needs?

A Board-Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) will do a behavioral study of your child. This study will be used to create your child's treatment plan. Treatment plans usually include specific goals for your child and the number of hours of therapy your child needs each week in order to meet them.

BCBAs oversee treatment plans and act as supervisors. **Therapists** are the people who actually do the therapy outlined in the plan.

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

Your child's neurologist, developmental behavioral pediatrician, psychologist or other provider who is an expert in ASD will usually recommend ABA when it makes sense for your child.

ABA may be helpful if your child is showing signs of problem behaviors, has a hard time communicating well or has challenges with adaptive skills (like getting dressed, brushing teeth, toileting, etc.).

How do I choose an ABA therapist for my child?

When choosing an agency or therapist, it is important to get clear and exact information. Here are some good questions to ask:

What model of ABA do you use?

Therapists may use different kinds of ABA, including:

- Discrete Trial Training
- Pivotal Response Training
- Natural Environment Training
- Natural Learning Paradigm

These differences are in *where* the therapy takes place, *how* skills are taught and *what* the focus of learning is. The ABA agency you talk with should be able to tell you more about their model and explain how they will use it with your child.

How long does it take to start services?

It can take some time to find a BCBA and a therapist. Each agency has different wait times. Wait times often depend on staff availability and insurance authorization.

The process should be long enough for the agency to do a full study of your child and create a solid plan, but short enough so your child does not miss out on key therapies.

Will my child have the same therapist all the time?

This is one of the hardest problems for every agency. Behavior therapists (the ones who do your child's therapy) often leave—for other jobs, to go back to school or for other reasons.

The agency should be able to tell you how they work to keep their staff from changing too much. Children with ASD can be sensitive to changes in routine, so you want to be sure that the agency has a plan for keeping staff and a plan for what to do when staff leave.

How are parents involved in ABA?

ABA therapy can work even better when parents and/or caregivers are part of the team and join in the therapy.

You should be given a clear understanding of *what* is being done during your child's therapy and *why*.

You should be given the tools to do these therapies with your child outside of the therapy sessions. This could involve meetings, trainings, watching your child's therapy sessions or being part of the session.

Does insurance cover ABA?

Since the 2011 Act Relative to Insurance Coverage for Autism (ARICA), most insurance plans have to cover ABA for people with ASD. To make sure that your insurance plan will cover ABA, use the Autism Insurance Resource Center's "[Am I Covered](#)" online tool.

MassHealth Standard and MassHealth CommonHealth cover ABA. MassHealth CommonHealth is a secondary insurance plan option for children under 21 with ASD.

What do I need for insurance authorization?

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

- 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. **Note:** If standardized testing was not used, this note must include a detailed outline of DSM-5 criteria.
- The results of **standardized tests**, such as the ADOS, CARS-2 or others listed by insurance or ABA agencies

Note: Standardized testing is optional. It is not required for making a diagnosis of ASD. If your child has not completed testing and has a diagnosis, your child is still eligible for ABA.

- A **recent physical exam**. This can come from your child's PCP or referring provider. **Note:** This is not always required, but some agencies need it.

Contact us

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



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This Family Education Sheet is available in Spanish.