

What is ABA?

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Applied behavior analysis (ABA) is a science dedicated to the understanding and improvement of human behavior. ABA differs from other fields in its focus, aim, and methods. **Behavior analysts focus on defining behaviors of social significance, often referred to as target behaviors.**

Behavior analysts intervene to improve target behaviors while demonstrating a reliable relationship between the intervention and improvements in behavior. Once an effective intervention is implemented, ongoing data collection occurs. Behavior analysts program for generalization and maintenance to ensure that the behavior maintains over time and across different settings and people. Behavior analysts often train staff and caregivers to implement all interventions in order to facilitate a consistent protocol.

ABA is a scientific approach for identifying environmental variables that influence behavior of social significance and for systematically developing a functionally related methodology to program for behavior change. Additionally, **ABA focuses on skill acquisition.** Skill acquisition can occur when a behavior analyst is teaching a new, functionally related alternative behavior (to replace an inappropriate problem behavior) or to teach academic, self-care, motor, social skills, etc.

So what does all this mean? Basically, behavior analysts study the environment in which the individual's target behaviors are occurring. Using functional behavior assessments, they scientifically determine what factor of the environment is maintaining the target behavior (known as the FUNCTION of the behavior). Using this information, an intervention that addresses that same FUNCTION is implemented in order to create an appropriate and positive change in behavior! By socially significant, we mean that the behaviors targeted are those that may cause harm or interfere with the individual's learning.

ABA is different from traditional psychology in that ABA focuses on **observable behaviors** rather than what an individual may be thinking (also known as an individual's cognitions). ABA techniques can be used in a wide variety of settings (schools, parent training, staff training, OBM, special education, self-management, etc), but it is important to note that the ABA theoretical approach lies heavily in manipulating the environment to create behavior change rather than changing an individual's internal events, or thoughts. ABA's theories are supported by **empirical data** that is obtained through controlled observation and measurement of behavior.

What ABA IS NOT!

- counseling therapy
- focused on changing an individual's thoughts
- bribery
- strictly used with pet training
- strictly used with individuals with autism
- striving to control the world

What makes ABA effective for children with Autism?

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What is Autism?

The term autism describes a condition which presents itself from early childhood. It is characterized by impairments in social interaction and, to some extent, impairments in language and communication skills. Individuals with autism may also display rigid, repetitive behaviors which may contribute to their challenge in adjusting to a rapidly changing world. As a 5-year-old girl puts it in an article published on Yahoo Parenting, individuals with autism “live in a world that is different than ours ... kind of like [their] brain does not work the same way.”

Autism usually presents itself as a very complex diagnosis. Challenges in social interaction are seen as early as the toddler years where the child with autism may not give parents, other caregivers, or siblings direct eye-contact, or may react negatively to physical contact (such as hugs and kisses). The child may also develop language skills much later than other children their age; or not develop language at all. For those children who do speak, their language may be distorted to some extent, or they may even speak at the level of their peers but have challenges communicating their feelings or emotions, and may have challenges following social cues. These challenges may carry over into their academic performance, where for some children with autism they may do extremely well in some subject areas, while falling significantly behind their peers in most other academic areas. No two children with autism are exactly alike. Autism is said to be a spectrum disorder, meaning, there are a range of levels of functioning within the autism community; some children may be lower functioning than others, and as such may display a different combination of skills than others.

What is ABA?

The field of Applied Behavior Analysis, commonly referred to as ABA or Behavior Analysis, is a field of psychology that applies a scientific approach to the study of behavior. It's roots are found in the early experimental research of B.F Skinner who identified some basic phenomena in our environment that affect behavior on a day to day basis. In other words, there are certain things in your environment that play an integral role in promoting certain behaviors, while other things in the environment may serve to reduce the likelihood of you engaging in other behaviors. It is through an intentional alteration of these phenomena that changes in behavior can be brought about, Skinner identified.

Behavior Analysts thus believe that behavior is not simply a result of innate genetic or biological factors, rather, the environment plays a critical role in the emergence, maintenance, or reduction of behavior. The goal of ABA is thus to use the basic principles of behavior to bring about a change in behavior to a socially relevant and meaningful degree for the client and those in their environment. Over the years, the basic principles of behavior that have been identified in laboratory research have been applied to real world situations and have been found to be very effective for a variety of cases; whether it be mental illness and disability, healthy eating and exercise, sexuality and relationships, parenting, or even business management. Over the years, practitioners in ABA have been identifying just how broad a reach the principles of ABA have in a wide variety of areas.

How is ABA used with persons with Autism?

Though the scope of ABA is revealed more and more with time, the most prominent and well known application of ABA is its use as a treatment alternative for individuals with autism. As described earlier, autism presents a very complex diagnosis that is characterized by a variety of behavioral impairments, whether it be speech, daily living skills, social interaction, academics, etc. That is, all current signs of autism are observable behaviors exhibited by the individual.

With ABA's focus on observable behavior, and behavior change to a socially acceptable and meaningful extent, it provides a unique, yet extremely effective approach to autism treatment. The environment in which the client operates on a daily basis (home, school, grandma's, the supermarket, etc.) is altered in such a way to reduce the likelihood that certain behaviors will continue to occur (e.g. severe tantrums, aggression toward self/others, and other inappropriate behaviors), while systematic training procedures are implemented to teach the individual appropriate social skills (peer interaction, appropriate classroom behavior, play skills, etc.), communication skills (developing vocal language or using alternative communication devices), academic skills (writing, reading, etc.), and much more.

What makes ABA effective?

ABA's effectiveness lies in its foundation in scientific research that have been conducted in laboratories as well as in the natural setting for decades. As such, all techniques used by behavior analysts are grounded in research that supports their effectiveness once they're implemented systematically. A component of ABA therapy is the development of individualized treatment packages; in other words, one package does not fit all. With autism being so complex, and each individual being so unique, individualized treatment packages play a key role in the effectiveness of ABA. The behavior analyst observes each individual client, assessing their current skill sets and those that need to be developed, the resources available to them, and their environmental setup, then specifically designs a treatment package that will be most effective for that client.

In addition, behavior analysts continuously collect data on their clients behaviors. This allows them to monitor client progress and make changes to treatment packages in real time. As such, treatment is continuously altered as needed as the client grows in his/her dynamic environment. Parents and other caregivers are also trained to implement treatment techniques to ensure that their effects are maintained even after sessions have ended. This is a key component in the long-term effectiveness of ABA therapy. All persons who interact with the client are incorporated in some way to help facilitate the continuation of treatment effects as well as their carryover into variety of environments or in the presence of a variety of people. This is especially beneficial for the individual with autism who may have challenges learning that certain behavior aren't inappropriate just at home, but they are inappropriate at school, at the park, and even when visiting the neighbors.

ABA effectiveness lies it's unique approach to the study of behavior, contrary to other areas in psychology. This approach is exceptionally beneficial for children with autism as the signs of autism are first seen in the behavior of the individual. As such, a science of behavior change focused on change to a socially meaningful degree is an ideal treatment approach for autism.