

Family

Guide

APPLIED BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS THERAPY

What families need to know and ask!

What is Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) Therapy?

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) uses principles of learning to help individuals achieve socially important goals and improve their quality of life. Individuals and families work with a behavior analyst to identify meaningful goals and put together a treatment plan. The behavior analyst collects information about an individual's skills and behavior to determine how to set up the instructional environment during therapy sessions. Structured teaching and positive reinforcement are used to meet the goals. Data are collected to see how skills change over time and to figure out adjustments that need to be made to increase success.

Possible goals for treatment:

- Increase Communication Skills
- Increase Life/Daily Living Skills
- Increase Play and Social Skills
- Increase Academic Skills
- Increase Job Skills
- Decrease Challenging Behaviors that Interfere with Quality of Life

Who Provides ABA Therapy?

- A **Board Certified Behavior Analyst** (BCBA) designs and oversees implementation of the therapy sessions. They also evaluate the individual's progress and make changes to the treatment plan in coordination with the team.
- A **Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analyst** (BCaBA) can also design, implement, and evaluate treatment. They are supervised by a BCBA.
- A **Registered Behavior Technician** (RBT) implements the treatment plan designed by a BCBA or BCaBA. They receive ongoing supervision.

How Can Families Be Involved in Their Child's ABA Therapy?

Families are often the one constant member of teams as their child grows and transitions between services. They are often the connector for their child's services in and outside of clinic and school. Families and therapists each bring unique expertise that can enhance outcomes. Families are experts on their child and family, bringing important knowledge of the child, past challenges and successes, and dreams for what their child's life will be like through adulthood. Behavior analysts bring knowledge about behavior and evidence-based interventions, and passion to facilitate success. When clinicians and families partner, the members of the team are more likely to feel supported and valued. Plus, strong partnerships are related to improved treatment outcomes. A partnership is a relationship that is built on trust and mutual respect, includes two-way open communication and sharing of ideas, and engages each member as equal decision-making partners, and provides opportunities to support one another in achieving goals set (Wisconsin Department of Education).

Here are a few ways that families can be part of treatment:

1. Share your expertise about your child and family.
2. Help create your child's treatment plan with the BCBA and be involved in making decisions.
3. Learn about the intervention strategies to understand why the strategies are used and how you can use them at home. You can do this by observing sessions, asking questions, and attending parent training sessions.
4. Once you have learned the strategies, you can practice the interventions with your child.
5. Share updates about your child's progress or any challenges/new concerns.
6. Celebrate successes together! Small achievements matter.
7. Collaborate with other professionals such as teachers in school to increase consistency for your child.



How can I partner with the clinician during the transition from therapy to school or other services?

1. Collaborate to make materials the you can share with the school team or other services.
 - Create a one-page paper about your child to share with school staff or other providers. This might include:
 - A picture
 - Any medical, allergy, diet, or sensory needs others should be aware of
 - How your child communicates best- word approximations, device, or gestures that your child uses to communicate with you
 - A list of your child's talents and strengths—bragging points
 - Behavioral strategies that motivate your child or help in certain situations
 - List preferences like favorite characters, YouTube videos, favorite foods and drinks
 - List of dislikes, triggers or fears, noises or toys they don't like
 - Tips from my family
 - Create a one-page paper about ABA therapy. This might include:
 - Treatment summary
 - Most recent goals and progress
 - Strengths and areas for support
 - Intervention tips
 - Design a binder or way to store documents and a communication logbook. Sections of the binder might include:
 - List of important contacts
 - Evaluation reports like school Multidisciplinary Team Report (MDT)
 - An MDT Report includes the results of the assessments that were done, whether or not the child met criteria for special education services, and the disability/disabilities if the child meets verification criteria.
 - An evaluation is done every three years to see if the child is still eligible for special education (unless the team decides it is not needed).
 - Note: An MDT Report and Individualized Education Program are legal documents. Families have the right to agree, disagree, or decline to sign the document. There are resources to support families as needed. To learn more about due process, visit [Family Guide to Special Education](#)
 - Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individualized Education Program (IEP)
 - An IFSP or IEP includes information like how the child is currently doing, annual goals, how progress will be monitored, related services provided, accommodations and modifications needed, time in the general education classroom, what special education services look like (when, where, how often, how long), and a transition plan by age 14.

- The IEP might also include a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) that describes intervention strategies to increase targeted behavior(s) and decrease behavior challenges that interfere with education.
 - The IEP Team meets at least one time a year to update the plan.
 - A family can request to meet with the team at any time.
 - Progress Reports on IEP goals. These are given at least as often as it is for other students.
 - Applications for state or federal programs like the Nebraska Disability Waiver, Nebraska Respite Services, Social Security
 - Notes for upcoming meetings like questions the family wants to ask, ideas to share, new goals to discuss
 - Communication Tracker. Plan to write notes when you speak or communicate (email, text, notes) with someone about your child's needs or services. Include the date, the person's full name and title, and information about the discussion. At times, the family might send a follow up email there is documentation. This tracker can be helpful during team meetings to remember conversations.
2. Discuss goals to support a successful transition. Ideas to support transition should match your child's needs. Below are a few ideas:
- Help your child adjust to new routines. Consider an earlier bedtime and wake-up time to prepare as the school year approaches. Work on activities typical in the classroom and moving from one activity to the next.
 - Set up a consistent routine. Sometimes having structured environments help kids to know what to expect. Visual schedules or times to signal transitions might help throughout the day.
 - Plan a visit to the school playground to become familiar with the place. Most schools allow the public to play on the playground when school isn't in session.
 - Arrange playdates with other kids who will also attend the school (e.g., meet at the school playground/park, visit the library). Plan for the playdate to match your child's needs, keep it brief so that it is more likely to be successful.
 - Work on school readiness skills and basic academic skills with your child leading up to kindergarten. You can help your child explore numbers, letters, and colors through age-appropriate activities, games, or workbooks. This will help them become familiar with some of the academic topics that they will learn in their kindergarten classroom.
3. Meet with the school team. You can mark the calendar for about a week before school starts to visit school and/or send an email to teachers, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) case manager, and/or your child's counselor. Request a meeting before the first day of school so you can walk around the school and let your child know where they are supposed to go the first day of school, meet the teachers, and let your child get comfortable with the classroom in a quiet time frame. During the meeting, the you might:
- Share the documents you created together, such as a one-pager about your child and ABA services received, with school team members. This includes paraprofessionals or aids and other members of the school team. Parents have important information that benefits all school team members and can offer support to ensure team members receive information.

- Ask school staff how *they* prefer to communicate—email, phone, a notebook sent back and forth between home and school.
 - Collaborate to arrange a communication plan that will work for everyone.
 - A communication plan between home and school can be listed as an accommodation on an IEP or 504 Plan; plan to ask for your communication plan to be written into the document at the next formal meeting.
 - Review the IEP or 504 Plan, highlighting important accommodations, interventions, and supports. You might request more information about the teachers or providers working with their child like:
 - Who is providing which services and supports?
 - Who is designing the specially designed instruction (SDI)? (*SDI helps a child make progress toward IEP goals*)
 - What training did these staff receive, or are there training needs for the district to consider?
4. Look ahead to provide encouragement.
- Transitions can be filled with many emotions and that is okay. You might feel excited, worried, sad, all of which are natural feelings. A few ways to offer encouragement:
 - Find ways to celebrate the new step in your child's start to school. Be ready to welcome your child home with love and encouragement. You can ask questions and/or read notes from your child's teachers that help your loved one reflect on their day and share about new friends and adventures.
 - Send thank you notes to teachers and support staff. Showing someone appreciation for their efforts can strengthen partnerships, encourage communication, and keep them motivated.
 - Take time for self-care.
 - Create an area for the child at home to have a safe and relaxing area for when the child needs downtime they know where to go.
 - Reach out to local parents or advocacy organizations within the area to see what resources are available to help provide support.



Additional Resources About the Transition to School

- [Family Guide to Special Education](#)
- [Nebraska Transition to Kindergarten Toolkit and Resource Guide for Families](#)
- [Along the Way: A Guide for Parents of Infants, Toddlers, and Children with Disabilities](#)
- [Parent Training and Information Center of Nebraska](#)
- [Disability Rights Nebraska](#)



What Questions Should I Consider Asking When Looking for ABA Therapy Services?

With an increase in ABA therapy resources, it can be challenging to figure out which provider is best for your family. Before starting to look at organizations, it can be helpful to think about what is important to your family and your preferences for therapy. Below is a list of questions you might ask to learn more about organizations you can considering for treatment. You can also use the checklist below to help organize information.

Logistics

1. Do you accept our insurance? Are there any out-of-pocket expenses I should be aware of?
2. What is the age-range for services?
3. What types of services are available (clinic, in-home, telehealth; individual, group)?
4. What related services are available within the organization (for example: Psychology, Speech, Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy)?

How the Organization Operates

1. How long has the organization been providing services?
2. What is your organization's mission and values?
3. How many clients do each of the Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBA) work with? How often do families meet with the BCBA?
4. Would we be scheduled to see the same therapist(s) or would the therapist(s) differ from week to week?
5. What happens if the assigned therapist is sick or unavailable? Are there other therapists available to fill in for those sessions?
6. What is staff turnover like?
7. How do you help your therapists stay up to date with the latest research and techniques in ABA therapy?
8. How do you handle confidentiality and privacy concerns during therapy sessions (for example, conversation with families in private spaces)? How are confidentiality and privacy protected?
9. What training is provided for managing a crisis or emergency (for example: medical, behavior escalation, elopement)? How do you handle situations where a client is experiencing a crisis or emergency?
10. Who would I contact if I had concerns about how treatment is going?
11. What age do your services go up to? How do you help families transition to other services (clinics serving older kids or schools)?

How Goals will be Selected and What Treatment will Look Like

1. What assessments do you use to help select goals?
2. How do you involve the client or client's family in the goal-setting process?
3. How do you approach developing treatment plans for your clients?
4. How do you ensure that therapy sessions are culturally responsive and inclusive?
5. How do you ensure that therapy sessions are age-appropriate and engaging for the client?
6. How do you ensure that therapy sessions are individualized and tailored to the client's specific needs?
7. How do you ensure that therapy sessions are conducted in a safe and comfortable environment?
8. How do you involve the client's family in the therapy process? How can the parents be part of the therapy? How do you help families learn ways to practice what you are working on in sessions?
9. What does a typical therapy session look like? Why do you do what you do during your therapy sessions?
10. How do you work with other professionals, such as speech therapists or occupational therapists, to provide comprehensive care for the client?
11. How do you handle challenging behaviors during therapy sessions? How do you handle situations where a client's behavior is interfering with their ability to participate in therapy?

How Progress will be Monitored and Decisions Made

1. How do you measure progress and adjust treatment plans accordingly?
2. How do you respond to situations where a client is not making progress towards their goals?
3. How do you respond to situations where a client is resistant to therapy?

4. How do you involve the client or client's family in the decision-making process during therapy sessions and in deciding next steps?

About the Provider(s) that You Are Likely to Work With

1. What inspired you to become an ABA therapist?
2. What kind of ABA training and certifications do you have?
3. What experience do you have working with individuals with autism?



Taking Notes to Make a Decision

This table includes key factors that can help you evaluate and compare ABA therapy organizations to help you make an informed decision based on your child's needs and family preferences. As you talk to individuals at organizations, you might choose to take notes in areas that are important to you or rate them.

Key Factors	Organization 1 Name	Organization 2 Name	Organization 3 Name
Logistics			
Insurance coverage/ out-of-pocket expenses			
Waitlist length/When child can start services			
Age range for services			
Types of service available (clinic, in- home, telehealth; individual, group)			
Related services available (for example: Psychology, Speech, Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy)			
Frequency of therapy sessions recommended			
Distance from home/transportation			
General Information			
Number of years organization has been in service			

Organization mission and values			
Number of clients that each BCBA works with			
Frequency of contacts with the BCBA supervisor			
Number of therapists interacting with my child daily/weekly			
Process if primary therapist is not available			
Safety and cleanliness of the facilities if in-clinic			
Safety and specialized training for staff (e.g., CPR, behavior management)			
Goal Setting and Treatment			
Family goals and treatment preferences incorporated into treatment			
Observation and training opportunities for the family			
Quality of staff			

interaction with children			
Collaboration with other professionals and services (e.g., medical doctors, teachers, speech therapists)			
Way of addressing concerns with scheduling or services provided			
Monitoring Progress and Making Decisions			
Use of data to evaluate progress and help make decisions			
Process for making treatment modifications as needed			

This guide was created by Dr. Sara Kupzyk and Francine Armstrong and the Nebraska Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (LEND) Program in collaboration with NEABA.

The information is intended to provide help families in their journey. Content does not imply endorsement by the Nebraska Association for Behavior Analysis or the Nebraska LEND.

If you have questions, please email Dr. Sara Kupzyk at skupzyk@unomaha.edu