

Caring for Your Child
APPLIED BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is a structured teaching program, using lessons that are broken down into their simplest form. The lessons are taught using repeated trials where the children are given a prompt (like "do this" or "touch object" or "look at me"). Correct responses and behaviors are rewarded with a lot of positive reinforcement (rewards).

When a child gives an incorrect response, it is ignored and appropriate responses are prompted and rewarded. Problem behaviors are approached the same way. At first, the child may be rewarded for doing something close to the desired response. Over time, as the child masters the lesson, rewards will come less quickly, and primary reinforcers (like bits of food) get replaced with social reinforcers (hugs, praise, etc.).

ABA uses treatments that have been proven effective by research. ABA methods are used to treat children with behavior problems by teaching their caregivers how to manage those problems. The treatment procedures help people develop skills with social value. One example of these treatment procedures is "discrete trial training."

Discrete trial training consists of four things:

1. A request for the child to do something (ex. "Please make your bed").
2. A response from the child, which may include the right answer/behavior or the wrong answer/behavior or nothing at all (ex. The child may either leave the room or make the bed).
3. A reaction from the therapist (or caregiver), which may include telling the child that he/she did it right, or telling the child that it was done wrong (ex. "Good job making your bed" or "you need to make your bed").
4. A pause to separate each request from another.

When a child does something right and a parent provides praise or a reward, the child is likely to do the same thing again in the future. This is called reinforcement.

When a child does something and a parent tells him/her that it was done wrong, the child is not likely to do the same thing in the future. This is called punishment.

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In discrete trial training, a child learns to respond to certain things and words. The teacher/caregiver tells the child whether he/she has said or done the correct thing...or not. This may mean that the person working with the child calmly tells the child “no” when they have answered wrong. It also may include telling the child “good job” when he or she answers correctly. Finally, if the child’s answer is partly right, the teacher may say, “not quite” or “pay attention”.

Discrete Trial Training includes one-on-one sessions for 30-40 hours per week with a trained therapist. ABA’s goal is to increase the child’s successes and decrease the failures. The therapist helps the child to understand what is being asked of him/her and to learn new skills. The therapist does this by giving the child prompts. A prompt is the aid given by the teacher to help the child figure out the correct response.

Hand-over-hand guidance is an example of a prompt:

In hand-over-hand guidance, big skills are broken down into small, easy-to-manage steps. When the child does well on these skills, a lot of rewards must be given. The therapy proceeds in small, carefully planned steps that build more skills. For example, one of the first tasks may be to get the child to sit in a chair. The therapist would provide physical prompts to seat the child in a chair in the correct position, and immediately give a reward.

In ABA therapy, the focus is on children learning new behaviors. When children know how to behave, problem behaviors often decrease. Therapists are trained to ignore bad behaviors and to focus on good behavior by use of rewards. Rewards can be whatever the child wants most. Many young children begin by responding to rewards such as candy or a chance to play with a favorite toy. However, these are difficult items to provide in the classroom, so teachers use rewards such as praise, tickles, hugs, or smiles.

The purpose of behavior therapy is to teach children how to learn, both academic and behavior skills. Behavioral methods, such as discrete trial training, support learning by replacing bad behaviors with good ones, and then being able to teach academic skills. ABA programs are created to meet the needs of each child; therapy includes different tasks in different places for each child. Newly mastered skills are to be used with different people, places, and things.

ABA programs are very structured. Children still need “down-time” and the chance to play. Some programs blend ABA into structured play and activities so that learning can be fun.

Children in the program often begin preschool 6-12 months after starting therapy. We believe that the best age to begin ABA therapy is between 24-42 months or before 3 ½ years of age. Most children are between the ages of 2 and 6 when they enter the program.

ABA programs produce big and lasting improvements for many children. ABA has been successful in educating persons with autism at any age. Early instruction with ABA in young children can allow integration into mainstream schools for many.

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