

PARENT RESOURCE GUIDE

A User-Friendly Guide to Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)

Understanding, applying, and making ABA work for your child at home.

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The information in this guide is drawn from the clinical expertise of Dr. John Carosso, Psy.D. and Dr. Robert A. Lowenstein, M.D., current research findings, and authoritative sources including the DSM-5 and the National Institute of Mental Health. It is intended for informational purposes and does not replace a professional evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

In his book *Managing the 5 Most Challenging Childhood Behavioral Problems of Our Day*, Dr. John Carosso devotes a chapter to Applied Behavior Analysis, or ABA. This approach is seemingly mysterious, frequently cited, but mostly misunderstood. Put simply, ABA is a systematized and regimented series of approaches to analyze, understand, and modify behavior. The approaches are applied to daily life demands and circumstances.

What Is ABA Used to Treat?

ABA is typically associated with the treatment of autism. However, ABA is used to treat essentially any type of behavior and for any condition we want to understand and modify — from a child being off task during math class to a child exhibiting self-stimulatory behavior.

How Does It Work?

ABA is very systematized and regimented. The process begins by analyzing the behavior and collecting data, hypothesizing about what's causing the behavior, developing and experimenting with different approaches and consequences, assessing the response, and continuing to refine and modify the program as the situation changes.

TERMS AND EXAMPLES

Common ABA Terminology

Observation, operational definition, collecting and analyzing data, functional behavioral assessment (FBA), differential reinforcement, positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, punishment, antecedent, response-cost, extinction, shaping, and chaining (forward and backward).

Can All That Be Made Parent-Friendly?

Absolutely — otherwise, what's the point? If you can't carry out the strategies at home, on your own, the approach won't be very effective. Dr. Carosso's version of parent-friendly ABA is straightforward, concise, and behavior-specific. The goal is to remove the jargon, target a problem behavior, and change the situation for the better.

Typical behaviors ABA can address:

- Child whines when redirected
- Refuses to clean up
- Child won't maintain attention
- Carrying out routines such as washing hands or getting dressed
- Bolting in a parking lot
- Sitting and carrying out a series of tasks
- Avoiding chores

STARTING OUT

A Simple 5-Step Process

We start with the two most powerful interventions — differential reinforcement and modifying our approach — then work through a simple 5-step process:

1. Pick a behavior you want to change. Start with the most problematic behaviors. Know when it occurs, how long episodes last, and the level of intensity.
2. Determine when the problem behavior is more likely to occur.
3. Intervene by providing abundant praise when the child follows through or begins to follow through. Differentiate the behavior you want to see from the behavior you don't, and reinforce the behavior you want.
4. Ignore whining and negative attention-seeking until the task at hand is complete. The only attention you provide is help, if your child appropriately requests it.
5. Assess your child's response and modify accordingly. You may need to give more animated praise for compliance, and even avoid eye contact when presented with whining.

The A-B-C Chart: Modifying Our Approach

Another powerful ABA strategy targets the Antecedent (what happens before the problem behavior), the Behavior itself, and the Consequence. As parents, we tend to focus on the B-C part of the equation. We may be better served by targeting the antecedent — what triggered the problem behavior in the first place. The further down the A-B-C we go, the fewer choices we have to intervene.

You ask your child to pick up his toys, and he ignores you. Instead of escalating, try antecedent-level strategies: give 10- and 5-minute warnings, get down at the child's level and make eye contact, make a game of it, break the task into smaller chunks, or wait for a natural break in play. You have as many options as your imagination can create.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

What About Time-Out for Whining?

Time-out is an aspect of ABA — also a form of extinction, but involving isolation rather than simply withholding attention. Time-out is effective for whining and pestering, but creates other complications. If simply ignoring is effective, why make life more complicated? Both ignoring and time-out are consequences. You'll likely be better off focusing on the antecedent — what can be done to avoid the pestering in the first place?

What Might That Look Like?

Ignore the whining, and when the child calms, teach a replacement skill — how to use their words in a mature tone to get what they want. Use a sticker chart for not whining or pestering. Set clear rules and guidelines for how your child can get their needs met without pestering.

Dealing with whining: when managing a behavior you want to stop, ignoring it is the best place to start. Children want attention and a reaction to their whining. If we don't give attention, the reaction fades. Ignoring is a form of extinction — the behavior fades because it is not 'fed.' At the same time, differentially reinforce (praise, high-fives) your child when they begin or complete the task.

ROUTINES

ABA is well suited to promote a child's independence through daily routines and tasks — from multi-step regimens like getting ready for school, to simple tasks like washing hands.

Task Analysis and Chaining

Take any task and break it down into steps. For example, washing hands: (1) Turn on the water, (2) Wet hands, (3) Soap up and rub together, (4) Rinse, (5) Turn off water, (6) Dry hands. Observe your child closely, note which steps go well and which don't, and practice the steps that need work. You can model the proper way to carry out each step.

Backward and Forward Chaining

Backward chaining: help your child through all the steps except the last, have them complete that step until mastered, then add the second-to-last, and so on. Forward chaining is the same, starting from the first step.

How Does Shaping Work?

Shaping reinforces closer and closer approximations to the end goal. To teach a child to walk: first praise sitting up, then standing, then taking first steps, then walking. Shaping is a wonderful and powerful way to learn.

ABA AND AUTISM

ABA for Children with Autism

ABA is especially helpful for children with autism to teach specific skills. Children with autism often struggle with language and subsequently learning letters, colors, shapes, and concepts.

Discrete Trial Teaching (DTT)

DTT is a specific technique — from highly structured table-time to casual play-based sessions. It is often confused with ABA, but DTT is a specific approach that uses ABA principles. The process: (1) Present a stimulus, such as two colors. (2) Prompt your child to point to one of the colors. (3) When the child points to the correct color, give a reward.

Errorless Teaching

If the child begins to point to the wrong color, you direct their hand to the correct color — the child cannot make a mistake. Then give reinforcement such as praise or a token. Be sure to vary your voice tone, change up reinforcers, stay super positive, and use no punishment.

Helpful Videos

Dr. Carosso produced teaching videos through the Apple Tree Institute to demonstrate ABA techniques and help parents improve the skills of their child with autism. Visit acpitt.com to access the full video series covering DTT, one-step directives, language development, play skills, self-stimulatory behavior, visual schedules, and more.

Applied behavioral analysis is a wonderful and powerful way to analyze behavior, plan an approach, and apply the strategies in a structured, child-friendly, and thoughtful way.

Ready to take the next step?

Doctors Carosso and Lowenstein and our experienced team are here to help.

Contact us to schedule an evaluation or to ask any questions.

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