



Education for Lifelong Mental Health

What I should know about

ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis)



What is ABA?

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is a way of teaching and helping people learn new skills and improve behaviors. It is often used to help children and adults with autism. ABA breaks skills into small steps and uses positive reinforcement (like praise, toys, or activities) to help the person learn.



Why do people use ABA?

ABA is called an “**evidence-based practice**.” This means research studies show it can help many people with autism learn important skills. For example, ABA has been shown to help with:

- Communication (like asking for what they want)
- Social skills (like playing or talking with others)
- Daily living skills (like dressing or brushing teeth)
- Reducing harmful behaviors (like self-injury or aggression)

Studies show that children who receive high-quality ABA programs can make meaningful gains in IQ, language, and social functioning (*Reichow et al., 2018*).

Why do some people say ABA is harmful?

Some **autistic self-advocates** and adults who had ABA as children say it was harmful. They report that ABA sometimes:

- Ignored their feelings or distress
- Tried to make them act “less autistic” (like forcing eye contact or stopping harmless stimming)
- Used punishment or harsh consequences in the past

Because of this, some people say ABA felt like “**compliance training**” and even call it abusive. These concerns are very important and have led to changes in how ABA is done today.



What is “trauma-informed ABA”?

Trauma-informed ABA is an approach that:

- Respects the person’s feelings, consent, and needs
- Looks for the reasons behind behaviors (like anxiety or sensory overload)
- Avoids using punishment
- Works with the person and their family as partners
- Values the person’s autonomy and dignity

This approach helps answer past criticisms by focusing on **kindness, choice, and understanding**. It teaches skills that truly improve quality of life, rather than just making someone look “normal.”

What does the research say about ABA outcomes?

- Large reviews show that ABA-based programs can help many people with autism improve in learning, communication, and adaptive skills (Makrygianni *et al.*, 2018).
- However, outcomes vary. Some people make big gains, while others make smaller gains.
- Research also shows that quality matters — programs that are individualized, use positive reinforcement, and involve families work best.



In summary

ABA is a well-researched treatment that can help people with autism learn skills and reduce dangerous behaviors. But it must be used in a way that **respects the person's comfort, choice, and mental health**. Modern, trauma-informed ABA listens to autistic voices and avoids harmful practices from the past.

Remember:

ABA should make you feel **safe and happy**, not scared.

You can say **stop** if you are uncomfortable.

Your voice matters!

References

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