

Understanding ABA: A Parent-Friendly Guide

Practical, jargon-free strategies for using
Applied Behavior Analysis at home





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Introduction

In my clinical work, I devote significant attention 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 geared toward the treatment of autism. However, in fact, ABA is used to treat essentially any type of behavior and for any condition we want to understand and modify. This can range from a child being off task during math class, to a child exhibiting self-stimulatory behavior during free time.

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.

— *Dr. John Carosso, Psy.D.*



TERMS & EXAMPLES

Terms and Examples



What's the hard part?

Well, it's not so much that it's hard, but there are lots of questions to be answered. In that respect, the challenging part is understanding how to carry out each step, what strategies to try, how to effectively experiment, and where to modify over the course of time.

What are some of the common terms of ABA?

There are a host of terms and phrases; some of the more common include: 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?

Sure, otherwise, what's the point. If you can't carry out the strategies at home, on your own, then the approach won't be very effective.

How is that done?

My 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.

Let's look at some examples.

We'll first start with typical behavioral issues, then move to use of ABA to treat autism. The primary difference is that using ABA for behavioral issues is a process of improving a child's behavior; however, the process of using ABA for autism is often about teaching concepts and skills. Of course, there is lots of overlap, but that sentiment is usually applicable.

Typical behaviors that need to be remedied:

- 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

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STARTING OUT

Starting Out



How would we start?

We'd start with the two most powerful of all the interventions: differential reinforcement and modifying our approach, then work through a simple 5-step process.

First, we target use of reinforcement:

- 1 Pick a behavior you want to change. We usually start with the most problematic behaviors and work down from there. The more you know about the behavior the better: when it occurs, how long any given episode persists, and the level of intensity.
- 2 Determine when the problem behavior is more likely to occur.
- 3 Intervene with abundant praise when the child follows through or even begins to follow through with the directive. In that respect, you differentiate the behavior you want to see from the behavior you don't, and you reinforce the behavior you want to see.
- 4 Ignore whining and any attempt to get your attention in a negative way, until the task at hand is complete. The only attention you'll provide is help, if your child appropriately requests it.
- 5 Assess your child's response and modify the consequence accordingly. For example, you may need to give more animated praise for compliance, and even avoid eye contact when presented with whining.

What if we change our approach?

I am a huge believer in modifying our approach to change a behavior. In that respect, another commonly used strategy of ABA is the A-B-C chart, which targets the antecedent (what happens before we see the problem behavior), the behavior itself, and the consequence for the behavior. We can focus on any of the three areas, but most times, as parents we tend to focus on a problem behavior, and then give a consequence (usually a punishment). In that respect, we focus on the 'B-C' part of the equation, instead of the 'A.' We may be better served to target the antecedent, or what triggered the problem behavior in the first place. In that case, maybe you can avoid the problem, instead of reacting to it. Note that the further down the A-B-C we go, the fewer the choices to

intervene. In that regard, you have abundant choices at the 'A' stage, but only a few at the 'C' stage.

An example of working at the 'antecedent level,' or at what triggered the behavior in the first place: you ask your child to pick up his toys, and he ignores you. You then raise your voice and a whining and yelling match ensues.

Instead, we approach the matter a different way; target what happens before the problem behavior (the antecedent) — you have as many options as your imagination can create.

For example:

- You can give warnings at 10 and 5 minutes out.
- You can get down at the child's level, get eye contact and softly explain what needs to happen, and the fun things you'll be doing later after this chore is done.
- You can make a game of it and race your child to get the chore done.
- You can break the task down into smaller chunks.
- Wait until your child is at a logical break time in his or her play and leverage a natural transition.
- Change your tone, or facial expression.
- Modify the transition in a step-wise process; maybe from your child being involved in a favored task, to sitting with you to talk and play a brief game, then transitioning to the actual chore.

So you see...

There are lots of ways to modify your approach. The list could go on and on — it's just a matter of using your imagination, and it's so much easier to adjust our approach to get a different response than to rely on consequences, which also tend to be less pleasant.

Another example: whining

Remember, when developing an approach, we want to keep it simple. Whining is a behavior we want to 'stop.' Any time we are managing a behavior we want to stop, ignoring the behavior is the best place to start. Children want attention, and they want a reaction to their whining and fussing; if we don't give attention, the

reaction will fade. Of course, we can use some consequence, but whining is best targeted via ignoring. If the whining does not result in some 'gain' for the child, then what's the point for the child? So, as a parent, we stick to our guns. At the same time, you're going to differentially reinforce (praise, high-fives...) your child beginning the task, and continue to monitor and praise until finished. Over the course of time, as things fall into place, you'll back off the praise a bit. By the way, ignoring the behavior is a form of extinction; the behavior (whining) fades, or becomes extinct, because it's not 'fed,' so to speak.

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What Can Be Done?

What about use of time-out for whining?

Time-out is an aspect of ABA. It also uses extinction, in terms of not giving attention to a behavior but instead isolating the child. So, in that respect, time-out is quite effective for whining and pestering, but time-out also creates other complications. Our goal is to keep it simple. If simply ignoring is effective, then why make your life more complicated? If you find the pestering intolerable, then you may, in fact, send your child to their room for a time-out, which would be appropriate. However, again, both ignoring and time-out are 'consequences' for the behavior; you'll likely be better off focusing on the antecedent, or what can be done to avoid the pestering in the first place.

What might that be?

So, how do we avoid having our child whine and pester? Again, we are only limited by our imagination. We can ignore the whining (a consequence) and, when the child calms, teach a replacement skill such as how to use their words, in a mature tone, to get what they want. We can use a sticker chart for not whining or pestering, which helps to squelch the pestering in the first place. We can also set clear rules and guidelines for how your child can get their needs met without pestering and, via your response to their whining, promote the understanding that there are better ways to get what they want.

ROUTINES

Routines



What about carrying out routines?

Applied Behavior Analysis is well suited to promote a child's independence through daily routines and tasks. This could include multi-task regimens such as getting ready for school, or more simple tasks such as washing hands.

There's a host of ABA terms targeting routines, such as task analysis and chaining. Simply put, first take any task and break it down into a few steps. For example, washing hands could include:

Washing hands, broken down:

1. Turn on the water
2. Wet hands
3. Run soap on hands and rub hands together
4. Rinse hands
5. Turn off water
6. Dry hands

Closely observe your child carrying out any given task, noticing those steps that go well, and those that don't (that's called completing a task analysis). Practice the steps that don't go well. You can model the proper way of carrying out the step.

We can use a similar approach for a series of steps in a daily routine.

For example, getting ready for school in the morning that involves:

- ✓ Responding to the prompt (or alarm) that it's time to get up
- ✓ Using the bathroom
- ✓ Washing up
- ✓ Getting dressed
- ✓ Going to the kitchen to eat
- ✓ Cleaning up after breakfast
- ✓ Brushing teeth
- ✓ Preparing items for school (backpack...)
- ✓ Getting to the bus on time

WRAPPING UP

Wrapping Up



Of course, any of these tasks can be broken down into smaller steps. However, we may first start with a broad perspective and assess, simply through observation, which of the steps tend to go smoothly, and which do not. We then provide lots of praise for staying on task, and target those tasks (e.g. washing up...) that don't go so well. In that regard, we'd break the task down into smaller steps and, as outlined above, see which small step is causing the hang-ups, and teach and practice the skill accordingly.

Backward and forward chaining

Those are fancy terms for looking at the entire 'chain' of events of any given task, and breaking the chain down into smaller steps, or links. Just as described above, we take any step, or link of the chain, and help our child step by step to complete each individual step. Backward chaining is when we help our child through all the steps except the last step, and have them do that last step until it's mastered, then the last two steps, and onward until the child is completing all the steps. Forward chaining is the same thing, but starting from the first link instead of the last, and teaching the first link, or step, before moving on to the next.

How does shaping work, and what's the difference between shaping and chaining?

Chaining is breaking down a series of tasks into smaller, more doable chunks, and mastering each chunk one at a time. Shaping is the process of reinforcing closer and closer approximations to the end goal, task, or skill. An example would be reinforcing a child learning to walk: first we praise sitting up, then standing, then taking first steps, then walking. The same would be true for, say, brushing one's teeth. The initial stage might be the child carrying out only a quick motion of the brush across their teeth, and this would be praised with a slow but progressive move toward becoming increasingly thorough, which could take days or weeks. A child would also be praised for saying "ba" to begin saying "banana." Shaping is a wonderful and powerful way to learn.

Overview

So, you can see that principles of ABA can be used for any behavior or task, and are only limited by one's imagination. Yes, it can be complicated, but the goal is to make the process as simple as possible and apply the techniques to daily life demands.

Autism

Children with autism demonstrate behavioral issues, and ABA can be used in the same way as we would for any behavioral difficulty. However, ABA is especially helpful for children with autism to teach specific skills. In that respect, children with autism often struggle with language and subsequently learning letters, colors, shapes, and concepts. There is a specific technique, referred to as discrete trial teaching (DTT), that ranges from being highly structured, regimented, and repetitive (table-time) to a similar approach used during free play activities. In fact, ABA and DTT are often confused for one another, and the terms are often used, erroneously, interchangeably. In that respect, DTT is a specific approach that uses principles of ABA, but it's not "ABA" per se.

Discrete Trial Teaching (DTT)

So, what does DTT look like?

It's a very simple but effective approach:

The three elements of a discrete trial:

1. Present a stimulus, such as two colors: red and blue.
2. Then, prompt your child to point to one of the colors.
3. When the child points to the color, you give a reward.

Errorless teaching

There is an approach referred to as 'errorless teaching.' In this approach, if the child begins to point to the wrong color, you direct the child's hand to the correct color; in that respect, the child cannot make a mistake. You then give a reinforcement such as praise or a token. Sometimes we'll give a small edible, but we try to avoid food items given it may not be healthy and can easily satiate (quickly lose its reinforcing value because your child loses interest — eat a bag full of cookies and you'll see what I mean). If we provide an edible, it's usually a very small piece.

DTT can be used in lots of ways. You can be sitting formally at a table, or it can be done casually while playing with toys. For example, child is playing with some

toy dinosaurs of different colors. Parent will prompt, “touch the blue dinosaur”; child touches the blue dinosaur, parent hugs and gives a high-five. Those three elements comprise one ‘discrete trial’ that can be repeated in a child-friendly way. The same approach can be used for counting, identifying household objects, and food items.

Be sure to change up your voice tone, the reinforcers, stay super positive, and use no punishment.

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Applied Behavior 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.



I hope you found this guide helpful in understanding and applying ABA with your child. If you have questions or would like additional support, our team at Help For Your Child is here to help.

You can reach us at hello@helpforyourchild.com or (724) 850-7200.

Sincerely,
Dr. John Carosso, Psy.D.