ABA applied behavior analysis Q&A

What is applied behavior analysis?

Applied behavior analysis (ABA) is the application of principles of learning to achieve meaningful outcomes. It is a well-developed discipline that is used by many professionals.

ABA emphasizes direct observation, objective measurement, and evaluation of the effects of assessments and interventions to be sure they are having the desired outcome.

Over the past several decades, ABA interventions have been used to help children and adults struggling with developmental disabilities, learning disabilities, and mental health concerns in many environments, including homes, schools, offices, and other community and residential settings.

At May Institute, we use the principles of ABA to support individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and their families to:

- Learn to communicate and interact with others
- Develop self-control and self-management skills
- Learn skills of daily living such as dressing and using the bathroom
- Learn to play independently and with others
- Increase academic skills such as reading and math
- Decrease challenging behavior such as self-injury or aggression
- Build independence

What are ABA interventions?

Interventions based on ABA for people with ASD and other intellectual and developmental disabilities can be categorized as either *comprehensive interventions* or *focused interventions*. Comprehensive interventions target a range of critical developmental skills, including communication, social interaction, and adaptive skills. In contrast, focused interventions target a specific concern, such as decreasing tantrums or increasing play skills.

Recent reviews of the literature have shown that behavior analytic interventions are the only treatment approach with a significant body of empirical support documenting effectiveness (*National Standards Project, Phase 2, 2015*).

Comprehensive Interventions

Comprehensive interventions are so called because they address most or all of the core and associated deficits of ASD. These interventions are often referred to as early-intensive behavioral interventions, or EIBI. In a comprehensive intervention, most or all of the following are addressed: communication, social skills, self-management, functional and daily living skills, and pre-academic skills.

Intervention typically occurs over an extended period of time, often a year or more, and therapy is generally delivered multiple times per week, often for between 10 and 40 hours in a given week. In comprehensive interventions, evidence-based teaching strategies are used, including discrete-trial teaching, incidental teaching, and naturalistic environment teaching.

Comprehensive interventions are usually delivered by a behavior analyst and can occur in a center-based program or through in-home services.

Focused Interventions

Focused interventions address a specific target or a small set of targets. Examples include interventions to teach requesting, reduce tantrums, or enhance play with peers. Focused interventions tend to be time-limited, occurring across a few weeks or months. Focused interventions also use evidence-based strategies such

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as functional behavior assessment, incidental teaching, and discrete-trial teaching.

Key Features

Across all ABA interventions there are key features that are hallmarks of behavior analysis. They include:

- Clear definitions of targets for interventions
- Ongoing and objective assessment of progress
- Interventions that use scientifically established principles of behavior analysis to affect change
- Careful demonstrations that observed changes (improvements) are due to the intervention and not to some other factor

At what age can someone benefit from the ABA approach?

People can benefit from ABA interventions at any age. We implement ABA within a developmental framework, meaning that the ways we teach and the skills we teach are developmentally appropriate. For example, a behavior analyst working with a 3-year-old might embed instruction in play, whereas a behavior analyst working with a teenager might teach within a group format or during an academic routine.

Adults can also benefit from ABA. At May Institute, we use ABA with the individuals we support across the lifespan. For example, ABA might be used to teach an adult with autism how to perform job-related tasks, such as serving coffee in a restaurant and restocking shelves. We also would use ABA to teach adults daily living skills, such as cooking, cleaning, and hygiene.

In what environments are ABA techniques used?

ABA techniques work across all environments — in homes, centers, schools, and places of employment. At May Institute, we use ABA across all these environments.

In-home therapists can work directly with a child to teach skills to the child and/or assist parents as they learn how to help their child acquire appropriate communication skills and functional living techniques.

Center-based programs are attended by children and often parents as well. Children attend center-based programs on a regular schedule. These programs can be used to teach all aspects of communication and interaction.

In schools, ABA techniques are used to teach academic skills such as reading, teach communication and social interaction skills, and address problem behavior.

In places of employment, ABA techniques are used to provide supports, such as on-the-job coaching and job training.

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May Institute is a nonprofit organization that is a national leader in the field of applied behavior analysis, serving individuals with autism spectrum disorder and other developmental disabilities, brain injury and neurobehavioral disorders, and other special needs. Founded more than 65 years ago, we provide a wide range of exceptional educational and rehabilitative services across the lifespan. The organization is one of the largest and most well-respected providers of services and special education schools for children and adults with autism and other special needs in Massachusetts and in the U.S.

For more information, contact May Institute at 800.778.7601 or info@mayinstitute.org.