



FACTS ABOUT ABA FOR HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

CASP is a trade association of autism service providers who've demonstrated a commitment to evidence-based services. Most CASP member organizations provide applied behavior analysis (ABA) services. ABA is an effective treatment for many autistic people, based on ample research meeting the rigorous standards of the American Medical Association.

ABA services are provided in schools, communities, and homes. As treatment for autism, ABA is covered in most fully insured health plans in all 50 states, Federal Employee Health Benefit plans, TRICARE, most self-funded health benefit plans, and under the EPSDT benefit of Medicaid.

Autism is becoming more prevalent. So is the demand for ABA and other autism services. That's placed ABA under considerable scrutiny, particularly on social media, where misinformation can spread quickly. CASP frequently engages stakeholders in respectful dialogue. This fact sheet was prepared with input from CASP members as well as autistic adults who received ABA services as children.

Does ABA acknowledge the differences that make a person with autism unique?

Yes. ABA providers serving individuals with autism seek to develop or restore abilities that are important to autistic people. For example, a provider might teach a person with autism how to shop for their favorite foods or how to interview for a preferred job. ABA providers celebrate each autistic person's individual identity and personality and incorporate personal preferences throughout treatment.

The Council of Autism Service Providers (2020). Applied behavior analysis treatment of autism spectrum disorder: Practice guidelines for healthcare funders and managers, 2nd edition.

Do ABA providers allow recipients of their services to make choices?

Yes. Credentialed ABA providers incorporate client choice throughout the treatment process. This begins at intake when clients and caregivers work with providers to set treatment goals that meet their needs (BACB, 2014, 4.02, 4.03, 4.04). It extends during treatment when clients are given the opportunity to choose the items and activities to be used during therapy.

Behavior Analyst Certification Board. (2014). Professional and ethical compliance code for behavior analysts. Littleton, CO: Author.

To what extent do behavior analysts seek compliance with arbitrary social standards?

Many social standards are not arbitrary. For example, people cannot walk down the street naked without consequence because our society does not accept public nudity. By teaching persons with autism to be aware of and make informed choices about existing social standards, ABA providers are helping autistic individuals to access new opportunities safely and as independently as possible. From early in ABA history, providers have recognized the importance of individualizing interventions to pursue results that are important to our consumers (e.g., Wolf, 1978). In doing so, providers work directly with recipients of their services to select meaningful, functional, and applied goals.

Wolf, M. M. (1978) Social validity: The case for subjective measurement or how behavior analysis is finding its heart. Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 11(2). <https://doi.org/10.1901/jaba.1978.11-203>

Does ABA contradict a philosophy that promotes independent living and neurodiversity?

Not at all. The focus of ABA therapy is on empowering autistic persons to develop skills they need to be as independent as possible in all areas of their lives. ABA providers teach individuals with autism how to be self-sufficient so they can safely navigate their world and live long and healthy lives. To that end, credentialed ABA providers teach communication skills to persons with autism so they are able to express their wants and needs, strengthening their ability to advocate and participate in ongoing treatment decisions.

Does the ABA profession accept the exploitation of people with autism?

No. All recipients of ABA services have a right to receive effective treatment that is free from exploitation. The ethical code of conduct adopted by credentialed ABA providers explicitly addresses multiple relationships and forbids exploitative relationships, including sexual relationships (BACB, 2014). Any ABA providers who exploit or attempt to use their power to take advantage of autistic persons should be reported to the appropriate legal or regulatory authorities.

Behavior Analyst Certification Board. (2014). *Professional and ethical compliance code for behavior analysts*. Littleton, CO: Author.

Is it true that ABA providers in the past engaged in questionable practices?

All science-based health care professions are constantly evolving. Rarely, if ever, would the type of health care services delivered decades ago be considered the standard of care today. For example, due to advances in breast cancer treatments, oncologists no longer recommend radical mastectomies for every breast cancer patient due to its significant impact on patients and superior alternative approaches. Lobotomies are rarely if ever performed today for patients with severe mental illness due to the development of effective antipsychotic and antidepressant medications. Society welcomes these advances in treatment and does not blame today's medical professionals for treatment decisions made by their predecessors.

Similarly, the ABA practiced decades ago is not the same as the ABA practiced today. For example, conversion therapy would violate several of the current ethical codes in the profession of applied behavior analysis. These include, at minimum, ethical codes related to a client's rights, integrity, consent, reliance on scientific knowledge, punishment, avoiding harmful reinforcers, affirming principles, and promoting an ethical culture (LeBlanc, 2020).

The last few decades have seen the practice of ABA advance with the establishment of quality controls in the field (e.g., ethical codes of conduct, established training curricula, supervised practice, certification, licensure, accreditation). In fact, many of these quality controls were established in response to incidents of abuse being carried out by some providers claiming to be practicing ABA.

Leblanc, L. A. (2020). Editor's note: Societal changes and expression of concern about Rekers and Lovaas' (1974) behavioral treatment of deviant sex-role behaviors in a male child. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 53(4), 1830-1836. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaba.768>

Is it true that Ivar Lovaas, the father of ABA, used electric shock to force compliance during treatment?

First, while Lovaas is credited with pioneering many important developments in the treatment of autism with ABA, he is not considered the founder of ABA. The *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* was founded in 1968 and the first published application of ABA is often recognized as occurring in 1949 (Fuller, 1949). In other words, ABA had been around for almost four decades before Lovaas published his seminal study in 1987.

To the question, although Lovaas made some important contributions to ABA practice, some of the statements he made and methodologies he used almost half a century ago (Chance, 1974) would be roundly rejected today and are in direct conflict with the ethical codes of conduct adopted by the ABA provider community (BACB, 2014). For example, Lovaas and his colleagues initially employed electric shock on a very limited basis and eventually faded it out entirely.

Chance, Paul. (1974). O. Ivar Lovaas Interview with Paul Chance. *Psychology Today*.

Fuller, P. R. (1949). Operant conditioning of a vegetative human organism. *The American Journal of Psychology*, 62(4), 587-590.



What is “punishment” as that term is used in ABA? Is it bad?

No. “Punishment,” as that term is used in ABA, is not bad. Unfortunately, though, that term is exploited by those who are misinformed about our practice. “Punishment” never involves retribution or harm to the recipient of services. Credentialed ABA providers rarely use punishment and only after other attempts to treat a behavior have failed.

When punishment strategies are used, they are expected to be used with other reward-based procedures and carefully watched. For example, a young child who runs across the parking lot may immediately be asked to practice walking across the same lot a few times while holding the hand of an adult. This action may decrease unsafe running in the future. Additionally, it serves as an opportunity for the child to practice a safe response that can be rewarded next time.

Do behavior analysts take into consideration the reasons why a behavior might be happening?

Yes. Credentialed ABA providers very deliberately take into account the reasons why recipients of their services perform certain activities. In fact, an entire methodology known as functional behavior assessment is designed around this basic idea. These reasons are expected to be incorporated into treatment to ensure needs, wants, and preferences are being met.



**The Council of Autism
Service Providers**

A non-profit trade association of autism service provider organizations committed to evidence-based care.

Learn more at casproviders.org.