

CHOOSING AN ABA PROVIDER

What is ABA Therapy?

Applied behavior analysis (ABA) is a type of therapy that relies on science and data to help improve behaviors that are important to the person receiving the therapy. The goal of ABA therapy is to help people with autism become more independent. Instructors should support them in learning how to do things on their own and stay safe and happy as they grow up.

Disclaimer

ABA therapy can be really effective, and it can either help a lot (by giving power to the person receiving it) or not help (by taking away power from the person) depending on the goals and methods used.

Green Flags

- The organization celebrates neurodiversity. Neurodiversity means that people see and engage with the world in lots of different ways. There's no single correct way to think, learn, or act.
- The instructor provides trauma-informed care. They recognize signs of trauma and understand how it can affect someone's life. Autistic individuals might face more challenges, like bullying or abuse, which can be traumatic. When setting goals and choosing ways to help, it's important to avoid actions that could bring back those traumatic experiences.
- Choices are respected by making sure everyone agrees and asking permission in all activities. If someone doesn't agree or protests, we listen and respect their feelings.
- The provider collaborates with the family and other professionals from the field when needed. Parents and caregivers are invited and encouraged to join or watch therapy sessions.
- All forms of communication are valued. Examples include sign language, augmentative/alternative communication (AAC) devices, etc.
- Natural environment teaching is prioritized. There is a balance between the learner taking the lead and the instructor taking the lead. The majority of instructional activities are designed to be enjoyable and meaningful for the learner.

Red Flags

- The instructor sets goals for the Autistic person to act like everyone else and fit in. They teach the person to hide behaviors that might make someone seem different, like having strong interests or doing repetitive movements.
- The instructor chooses goals and ways to help without thinking about past experiences that might have been upsetting or difficult for someone.
- The instructor focuses on making people do what they're told without asking for their opinion or agreement. Often, instructions are given without giving the person a chance to share their thoughts or agree. Even if someone disagrees or doesn't want to, their feelings are often ignored and importance is placed on making sure they do what they were told to do.
- The instructor doesn't work together with the family or other specialists like speech, occupational, or physical therapists; counselors; or psychologists. They do not let the parents or caregivers be part of or watch therapy sessions.
- The instructor puts a lot of focus on using spoken words only.
- The therapy is led by the provider, and a lot of importance is given to doing structured activities at a table. The sessions take place in places that are too strict or limiting, like switching between doing tablework and taking breaks.



Green Flags

- The instructor co-regulates with the Autistic person. Co-regulation means that a coach or support person guides and helps you when you're feeling overwhelmed or upset. Understanding your distress or need for connection, they offer kindness and help.
- The goals are personalized and important to both the learner and their family. They concentrate on improving the learner's communication skills and independence.
- The learner looks forward to sessions. The learner is happy, relaxed, and engaged during sessions.
- The instructor uses pictures, schedules, written instructions, and spoken words to help the person understand things better.
- The person's sensory needs are thought about and taken care of. It's okay for them to do safe things that help them feel better, like fidgeting or rocking.
- The instructor has enough and the right kind of training to work with Autistic people, including training specific to the learner they're working with. They also have to keep learning new things to get better at their job.
- The instructor has been trained and certified in how to handle tough situations with compassion, how to do CPR, and how to give first aid.
- The instructor listens to Autistic people and wants to make ABA therapy better.



Red Flags

- The instructor does not give the Autistic person attention or support when they're upset. This includes ignoring behaviors meant to seek help or when they're feeling distressed.
- The goals mainly aim for the learner to follow rules and behave like people who don't have autism. They don't think about what the learner really needs, likes, or wants when they choose the goals.
- The person being helped often feels upset or uninterested during sessions. They might seem upset during the things they're supposed to learn, or they may seem bored.
- Pictures or other visual aids are not used.
- The person's needs for things like touch, sound, and sight aren't thought about or taken care of. They're told not to do things that help them feel better, like fidgeting or rocking.
- The instructor hasn't had much or any special training for working with Autistic people. They haven't been taught specifically about the person they're working with.
- The instructor hasn't been trained for emergencies.
- The instructor doesn't know about or doesn't want to talk about making ABA therapy better.

Oh no! I see red flags in my child's ABA therapy.

What should I do?

Start talking with your provider as soon as you have any worries. Work together with your provider until everything is fixed. If things don't improve, find someone else to help. You can also check out free classes for parents and caregivers from ABC of NC and other resources that support neurodiversity ([linked here](#)).