

Applied Behaviour Analysis Questions and Answers

Ambitious about Autism uses Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) to support learning at TreeHouse School and its other services.

This document is designed to help parents and carers understand ABA and how it can help children and young people with autism to develop, progress and achieve.

We are aware that it can be difficult to describe ABA and would very much welcome the views of parents and carers on ways that we could develop and improve this document. Please send your comments to:

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What is behaviour and how do we learn?

Behaviour is everything we do – our actions, thoughts, language etc.. This can be as diverse as laughing at a joke, scratching when something rough is on our skin, crying when watching a sad film, having a conversation with our partner, or thinking about our plans for the coming day.

Relatively simple behaviours such as crossing the road when a green man shows at a pelican crossing through to complex behaviours, such as playing the violin like a maestro, are learnt through the same basic processes. Learning is something that we all do every day throughout our lives.

What is Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA)?

Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) is a scientific method used to help people to learn. Learning is broken down into simple steps and adapted to an individual's needs and level of progress.

ABA can be used as a means to teach people something new or improving what they can already do. ABA is used widely across the world and in many areas. For example, children with autism can be taught skills that they otherwise find difficult to learn, people with depression can be supported to change the way they think negatively about the world and drivers can be encouraged to wear seatbelts in cars.

Why is ABA used to teach children and young people with autism?

Many individuals with autism find it hard to learn and so it is helpful to use a method that breaks down learning into more manageable steps. ABA does this in a scientific yet person centred way. This means that the professional supporting the learner is trained in a wide range of tried-and-tested ways to help someone to learn, record the learner's progress and adapt what they do to meet the needs of that individual. ABA is personalised to the needs and interests of the individual and adapted to how that individual responds.

Where does ABA come from?

ABA comes from a science of learning. ABA methods have been used to support individuals with autism for several decades.

The current international interest in using ABA for the benefit of children with autism came from the work of Dr Ivar Lovaas, a Norwegian psychologist who taught at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and published a famous research outcomes paper in 1987. ABA has evolved significantly since Dr Lovass and is used flexibly in numerous sectors and situations across the world.

Why does TreeHouse School use ABA?

TreeHouse School uses the principles of ABA because they are evidence-based and every day we see positive results enabling children and young people with severe and complex autism to progress and develop new skills.

Children at TreeHouse School are taught by a team of multi-disciplinary practitioners consisting of ABA professionals, teachers and health professionals. Team members work to support a child's learning, review progress and adapt to meet specific needs and style of learning.

Because we closely monitor each child's progress, the team is always adapting to the child's needs and making adjustments to teaching methods. The National Curriculum is the basis for each pupil's personalised curriculum at TreeHouse School.

Does ABA work for all children and young people with autism?

Outcomes as a result of ABA will vary from child to child because success is different for each individual. ABA is not a 'cure' for autism – there is no known 'cure'. ABA helps people with autism to learn, thrive, achieve and lead fulfilling lives. Outcomes depend on what is appropriate for an individual child. For example, not every child with autism will be able to communicate with other people using typical spoken language (although some will be able to). However, we can work using ABA methods to improve a child's ability to communicate.

There are a host of approaches for teaching children with autism that are used across the world - some of which are evidence-based, others not. We believe it is important that parents and professionals use methods that: help a child to progress, are safe and enjoyable and we are committed to help build the evidence on what works in supporting children with autism.

Is ABA the best method for teaching children with autism?

Every child with autism is different and will learn in different ways. ABA is a useful approach because it is focused on *how* to teach children with autism, monitors progress and adapts methods. ABA is an evidence-based and effective method for teaching children and young people with autism.

Is ABA suitable for all children with autism or just those with severe and complex needs?

Autism is a spectrum condition and ABA, because it is an individualised approach to behaviour change, can be used to teach a child regardless of where they sit on that spectrum.

Can ABA help support a child in mainstream education?

Yes. ABA is used in a wide range of settings to help children with autism to gain the skills to learn and achieve. The outcomes achieved as a result of ABA will vary from child to child because success is different for each individual. ABA methods can be used to

support children with autism to access, or to stay in, mainstream schools. ABA is not limited to a special school setting.

Is ABA expensive?

Being ambitious for all children and young people with autism means that they must receive the support they need to learn, thrive and participate. Without this education, many children fail to learn the skills they need to have fulfilling and productive lives and may be more costly to support in later life. It is important to measure the costs of successfully supporting a child's learning through ABA against the progress made and their outcomes in adulthood.

I've heard that ABA staff use something called aversives?

Ambitious about Autism condemns using aversives with an individual (i.e. things that they dislike or experience as a punishment) to motivate them to change their behaviour. We regard this as both unethical and an infringement of an individual's human rights.

We never use aversives at TreeHouse School. Instead, we use positive activities (we call these "reinforcers") in our teaching. Children learn best when they are positively motivated and having fun.

If ABA is so good then why doesn't everyone use it to work with people with autism?

There are many other methods on offer to parents, carers, and those commissioning services for individuals with autism – some of which are evidence based, others not. We believe it is important that parents and professionals use methods that help a child to progress, are safe and enjoyable, and have been shown by research to work both generally and for that individual.

Everyone who has autism is different and they will, therefore, respond to teaching and support in different ways. Our evidence is that ABA works and that is why we use this approach. We believe that professionals should be aware of all methods available and provide information so that parents can make an informed choice regarding their child's tuition.

What are you doing to promote ABA?

Ambitious about Autism is committed to developing ABA practice for children with autism, to commissioning and disseminating research on the outcomes, and to training others in ABA-based skills. We also collaborate with other ABA and autism organisations to promote high quality support for individuals with autism. For example, we are a core member of a collaborative project that is focused on defining the knowledge and skills needed by ABA staff who work with children with autism.

What is the proof that ABA works?

There have been numerous scientific studies on the effectiveness of ABA, many of which show positive benefits for children with autism. Research studies show positive outcomes of comprehensive ABA educational interventions including: increases in cognitive performance (i.e. "IQ" increases), increases in adaptive skills (e.g. communication and daily living skills), and increases in social behaviours.

We see ABA in practice every day at TreeHouse School and know that our children show real and lasting progress as a result of the work we do. We are working in partnership with Bangor University to further understand the outcomes for our children so that we can share our results with others.

Are there ABA schools?

Yes. There are a number of ABA-based special schools. To find out more go to - <http://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/abaschools>

How can I find a good ABA practitioner?

To find an ABA practitioner you should contact:

PEACH (Parents for the Early Intervention of Autism in Children)

The Brackens, London Road, Ascot, Berkshire SL5 8BE

Tel: 01344 882248

Fax. 01344 882391

Email: info@peach.org.uk

Website: www.peach.org.uk/Home