

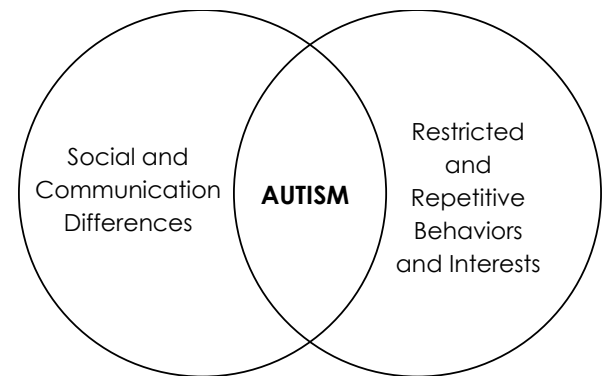


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Autism

What is autism?

Autism is a name for a brain-based pattern of differences in how a person experiences and interacts with their environment. Autistic people have differences in how they socialize and communicate (“social and communication differences”) AND in the way they react to changes and deal with sensory experiences like loud noises and bright lights (“restricted and repetitive behaviors and interests”).



What does autism look like?

Like all people, autistic people are individuals. Some autistic people are happy to spend more time alone, and some people are very sociable and outgoing. Some autistic people speak to communicate, and some use signs, or a device, or behavior to communicate. Some autistic people have passionate interests that become their life's work. Some move differently and find joy or relaxation in movements like flapping their hands or walking on their tiptoes. All autistic people experience love, joy, loneliness, sadness, pain, and every other emotion, but they may have a unique way of showing how they are feeling. There is not one way to be autistic, like there is not one way to be human.

What does an autism diagnosis mean for my child?

Your child is still the same amazing and unique person no matter what labels they are given. Being diagnosed with autism does not put any limitations on what they can do. An autism diagnosis means that a professional thinks that certain therapies, teaching strategies, and parenting techniques may help your child reach their full potential. Without an autism diagnosis from a medical provider and an autism classification at school, your child may not get access to all of the services that would benefit them.

Where can I find out more?

Many autistic teens and adults have written about their experiences. Some places to start are:

- the Autistic Self Advocacy Network: <https://autisticadvocacy.org/about-asan/about-autism/>
- the Autistic Women and Nonbinary Network: <https://autisticadvocacy.org/about-asan/about-autism/>
- Neurodivergent Narwhals: <https://neurodiversitylibrary.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/the-signs-of-autism.pdf>



Autism Therapies

Autism Therapies: What Works?

There are many kinds of autism therapy. Some therapies are based on high quality scientific data, so they are more likely to help children learn. Here are some examples:

Type of Therapy	Main Ideas of the Therapy	Example Programs
Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)	Understanding what happens just before and just after a child's behavior helps adults know how to respond. For example, if a child gets a reward every time they do something, they are more likely to repeat it.	General ABA programs Pivotal Response Training Discrete Trial Teaching Early Start Denver Model
Developmental Approaches	Focus on improving certain skills, like communication or daily living skills, in a way that is appropriate for the child's age and level of development.	Speech/language therapy Occupational therapy Physical therapy
Educational Approaches	Autism treatments are provided in a classroom setting.	TEACCH
Social Approaches	Teaching children what to expect in social situations can help improve relationships and reduce stress.	Social Stories Social skills groups like PEERS
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy-Informed Interventions	Thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are all related. Helping a child see a new way of thinking about a situation can help them feel and act differently.	Facing Your Fears (for anxiety) Unstuck and On Target (for cognitive inflexibility)

Other therapies have not been studied in as much detail, so less is known about how well they work. Examples of these include the Developmental, Individual Differences, Relationship-Based model (also called "Floor time") and Relationship Development Intervention (RDI). Finally, there are many therapies that do not work, and might even be harmful. There is no medication to target the core traits of autism.

Where to find out more:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/treatment.html>

National Clearinghouse on Autism Evidence and Practice: <https://ncaep.fpg.unc.edu/>

National Standards Project:

<https://asatonline.org/wp-content/uploads/asatdocuments/National-Standards-Project-Phase-2.pdf>

Autism: ABA Therapy



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What is Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) Therapy?

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is a type of therapy based on learning and behavior science. The fundamental principle of ABA is that what happens right before and right after a behavior teaches someone whether they should repeat that behavior again in the future. For example, if a child gets praised and gets what she wants every time she says “please,” she is more likely to say “please” next time she wants something. Or, if a child gets to have more screen time every time they tantrum when an adult tries to take the screen away, they realize that tantrums are an effective strategy for getting what they want. ABA therapy changes what happens right before and after a behavior to teach a child to behave differently.

ABA was first developed in the 1960s, and has changed dramatically since then. Many different types of therapies based on ABA have been developed, but they are often all included under the umbrella term “ABA”. Some examples are:

Category	Examples	Comments
Early ABA Methods	Discrete Trial Training Lovaas Method Verbal Behavior	Developed in the 1960s and widely available as a treatment in the 1980s. Originally used aversives or punishment.
Early Intensive Behavioral Intervention	Early Start Denver Model Early Social Interaction Project Project Impact	Intervention based on ABA principles delivered over years at an intensity of 20-40 hours per week.
Naturalistic Behavioral Intervention	Pivotal Response Training Natural Environment Teaching Achievements Program at Kennedy Krieger Institute	Intervention focusing on techniques to increase motivation and performance (child-preferred activities in the natural environment, incidental teaching, consideration of developmental prerequisites).
Parent-Mediated Intervention	Hanen Project ImPACT JASPER	Parent training and coaching to provide consistent intervention for joint attention, social communication, and behaviors. Studied as a method for augmenting of therapist-led interventions.

Autism: ABA Therapy



What are some commonly expressed concerns about ABA?

Some adult autistic self-advocates and other stakeholders have expressed strong concerns about ABA therapy. Some examples of these opinions include:

- Concerns that ABA teaches children to comply with adults rather than advocate for themselves or respond naturally to their own discomfort, which is psychologically damaging and potentially increases the risk of abuse.
- Concern that ABA prioritizes blending in with non-autistic (“neurotypical”) people over building useful skills for improving quality of life
- Concern that ABA therapy assumes that autistic behaviors are wrong and autistic people cannot be accepted unless they change who they are
- Concerns that ABA therapy is rooted in an ableist perspective (that being autistic is not the “right” way of being in the world)
- Concerns that ABA therapy aims to suppress child’s expression of distress (e.g. meltdowns) rather than provide accommodations (e.g. reduced sensory demands)
- Concerns about the history of aversive methods being used in ABA therapy

However, other autism stakeholders point out that ABA is a huge, generic category of interventions that has evolved since it was first developed about 60 years ago. Some of the criticisms may apply to the way ABA therapy was implemented in the past, but less so now. Ideally, modern ABA-based therapy uses more flexible, child-led techniques in the natural environment (home or school) to work on goals for lessening disability and improving quality of life. This evolution is due in part to the vigorous and successful advocacy efforts of autistic adults who had negative or even traumatic childhood experiences with older ABA methods.

How can parents choose a therapy that best supports their autistic child’s learning and emotional health?

Choose a type of therapy backed by scientific evidence. There are many types of autism therapies. Some are helpful, some are ineffective, and some are harmful. Every family has a limit to the resources (money, time, energy) they can devote to autism therapy, so ideally every therapy session will help a child move closer to their goals. Therapy is most likely to be effective if it is backed by objective scientific studies.

Autism: ABA Therapy



Trust your instincts. Parents are the experts on their children, and are often the first to notice if something is not going well. If a parent is concerned that a therapy is not helpful or is harmful for their child, they should talk to their support system including the child's doctors and teachers.

Not every therapist is right for every child. Sometimes a therapist is not a good “fit” for a family, but a different therapist or type of therapy might be very helpful for them. This does not mean the first therapist is unskilled or “bad.” (When we try on a pair of shoes that doesn't fit, we don't assume that all shoes are wrong for us, just that we need to try on another pair.)

Ask your child's therapist lots of questions. High quality therapy should have explicit, individualized, measurable goals that the family and therapist agree on together. This means that the therapist and family will talk about what the goals are, how to work on goals, and how to measure progress periodically so that everyone can make adjustments as needed.

Where can I find out more?

The Autism Navigator website from Florida State University has video examples of different types of therapies.

<https://autismnavigator.com/asd-video-glossary/>

The Autistic Self Advocacy Network has a policy statement page explaining their position on ABA.

<https://autisticadvocacy.org/about-asan/what-we-believe/>

The Autism Science Foundation also has a position statement on ABA.

<https://autismsciencefoundation.org/statement-on-use-of-applied-behavior-analysis-aba-for-autism/>

This article for doctors from the American Academy of Pediatrics has more technical information on autism interventions. [Identification, Evaluation, and Management of Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder | Pediatrics | American Academy of Pediatrics \(aap.org\)](#)