

Glossary of ABA Terms: A Parent-Friendly Reference

Common ABA terms explained in clear, everyday language.

Starting ABA often means hearing a new vocabulary. This glossary explains common terms in everyday language so you can feel more confident in conversations about your child's care. You don't need to memorize anything; keep it as a reference, and ask your team whenever a term is unclear.

ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis)

A science-based approach to understanding how people learn and how behavior works. ABA therapy uses these principles to teach skills that are meaningful in a person's daily life.

Assent

A learner's own ongoing agreement to participate, shown through words or actions. The team pays attention to assent throughout sessions.

Baseline

Information collected before a new goal or intervention begins. It gives the team a starting point for measuring change.

BCBA (Board Certified Behavior Analyst)

A graduate-level professional certified by the Behavior Analyst Certification Board. Your BCBA designs your child's individualized plan, supervises the team, and works closely with your family.

Behavior

Anything a person does that can be observed and measured. In ABA, behavior includes everyday actions like speaking, playing, getting dressed, and expressing emotions, not only challenging behavior.

Behavior Technician (BT) / RBT

A trained team member who works directly with your child under BCBA supervision. A Registered Behavior Technician (RBT) has completed specific training and certification requirements.

Services, goals, and progress are individualized. Nothing on this page guarantees a specific result, timeline, or authorization.

Data Collection

Recording information about how your child responds during sessions, such as how often a skill is used or how much help is needed. Data helps the team make decisions based on observation rather than assumptions.

Discrete Trial Training (DTT)

A structured teaching format that breaks skills into small steps, each with a clear beginning and end. DTT is one of several teaching approaches that may be used.

Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA)

A process for understanding why a behavior is happening by looking at what happens before it, the behavior itself, and what happens after. The information helps the team plan supports and identify skills to teach.

Generalization

Using a skill in new settings, with new people, or in new situations. For example, asking for help at home and at school, not only during sessions.

Goal

A specific, measurable skill or change the team is working toward. Goals are individualized, chosen together with your family, and reviewed regularly.

Intervention

The teaching strategies and supports used to help a learner build skills or reduce behaviors that interfere with learning, safety, or quality of life.

Maintenance

Continuing to use a skill over time after direct teaching has been reduced. The team checks maintenance as part of reviewing progress.

Natural Environment Teaching (NET)

Teaching that happens during everyday activities and play, often following the learner's interests.

Pairing

Building a positive, trusting relationship between a learner and a team member, often through shared enjoyable activities, before more structured teaching begins.

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Caregiver (Parent) Training

Sessions where caregivers and the BCBA work together on understanding the plan and how to support it in ways that fit family life.

Positive Reinforcement

When something follows a behavior and makes that behavior more likely to happen again. What is reinforcing is unique to each person.

Prompt and Prompt Fading

A prompt is help given so a learner can complete a step, such as a gesture, a spoken cue, a picture, or physical guidance. Prompt fading means gradually reducing that help as the learner becomes more independent. How prompts are used is explained to you in your child's plan.

Replacement Behavior

A skill taught to meet the same need as a challenging behavior in a safer or more effective way, such as tapping someone's arm to get their attention.

Reinforcement Schedule

How often reinforcement is provided. Schedules are often adjusted over time to become more like everyday life.

Shaping

Teaching a skill by reinforcing small steps that gradually get closer to the final skill.

Target Behavior

A clearly defined behavior the team is working to increase or decrease, described so everyone can observe and measure it the same way.

Task Analysis

Breaking a multi-step skill into smaller steps. For example, handwashing might be broken into turning on water, wetting hands, using soap, rinsing, and drying.

Treatment Plan

A written document prepared by your BCBA that describes your child's current skills, goals, teaching strategies, and recommended service hours. It is reviewed with you and updated regularly.

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Learning these terms is a process, not a test. Ask your BCBA or team to explain anything that's unclear. Clear communication is part of a strong partnership.

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