

Reach's Position on Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) Revised 2022

Background:

Reach Child and Youth Development Society has been providing services for over 60 years, including services to children with autism and their families. Since 2001, Reach has also been providing an ABA program. The Reach program began as a pilot project under the name of EIBI (Early Intensive Behavioural Intervention) services and was so successful that the government decided to continue funding and the program has continued to operate over the last 20 years. Annual surveys from parents demonstrate strong satisfaction with the program and many families have continued to maintain services with Reach because of their positive experiences with Reach ABA. Nevertheless, ABA programs in general have been receiving a good deal of criticism in the last several years.

Objections to the use of Applied Behaviour Analysis as a treatment approach to autism have recently been on the rise. These objections are of two main types. The first is based on the use of the principles of behaviour as a manipulative or coercive means to change behaviour, while the second is based on the idea that ABA approaches autism as a disability that needs to be eliminated or hidden rather than accepted and accommodated.

We have prepared this position statement to make clear that Reach uses ABA as a tool for improvement in quality of life and recognizes that improving quality of life implies improving understanding and acceptance of autism, not eliminating it. Reach uses this tool as a teaching method and, with quality of life being the primary goal, works to ensure the children are happy while learning, that their autonomy is respected, and that what is being taught is in no way denying any part of their identity.

What is ABA?

Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) is a way to teach children. ABA aims to teach meaningful skills using methods that have been proven over time to be effective.

ABA is based on the science of learning and behaviour and it has varied and broad applications beyond the field of autism (e.g., education, healthcare, geriatrics, pediatrics, business and industry, environmental sustainability).

Reach ABA does not aim to eliminate or hide autistic traits but rather, teaches children skills that will improve their quality of life.

How do we use ABA at Reach?

Reach ABA is a skill-building program that uses the principles of ABA as well as knowledge of child development to teach functional, developmentally appropriate skills to children with autism in these areas:

- Communication (e.g., asking for things, refusing and protesting, conversation)
- Academics (e.g., reading, counting)
- Play/social skills (e.g., taking and waiting turns, playing with toys, playing with others)
- Fine motor skills (e.g., printing, colouring, cutting)
- Daily living skills (e.g., teeth brushing, toileting, dressing)

We conduct a thorough assessment using input from all relevant sources, identify important skills and concepts, and break them down into teachable parts. Each skill is organized and broken down into manageable and understandable steps and systematically taught over time. Learning opportunities occur frequently and are naturally embedded into the places, activities, and routines that are relevant for that individual. Our teaching is mostly play-based and we provide fun and engaging activities that respect autonomy and incorporate children's preferences and interests. We know that children learn best when they are happy and engaged and that is what we strive for when teaching our learners. Some of the teaching methods we use include video modeling, visual supports, and social narratives (including Social Stories™). We take data to determine how to proceed with teaching a skill and to be accountable for the decisions we make.

We are a family centred program that provides individualized services customized to the needs of each child and family. Families are the key decision makers in establishing priorities for intervention and the ABA team provides education to assist families in creating a supportive environment for their children to learn and develop. The ultimate goal of our work and our teaching is to improve an individual's quality of life and enable them to be independent, productive, and happy, as defined by that individual and their family. It is not a "one size fits all" approach – the focus is on individualizing goals to meet the needs of each person and respecting and valuing each person's unique abilities.

Who are the team members?

The Reach ABA program consists of an interdisciplinary team of people with extensive experience and expertise in a variety of fields. The most important team member is the family, and the family will play the most significant role in determining priorities for their child's development. The other members of the Reach team may include behaviour consultants (BCs), speech-language pathologists (SLPs), occupational therapists (OTs), associate behaviour consultants (ABCs), and behaviour interventionists (BIs). We also collaborate with other team members outside of Reach such as preschool and school staff (e.g., teachers, education assistants); medical professionals (e.g., psychologists, pediatricians); and other therapists (e.g., SLPs, OTs).

Can ABA be combined with other approaches?

ABA is fully compatible with other treatments such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, and other evidence-based practices (EBPs), and professionals in these areas can work collaboratively together. Several prominent EBPs are also based on and use ABA principles and teaching methods, such as Positive Behaviour Support (PBS), the Early Start Denver Model, and cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT).

Lastly, and most importantly, we at Reach are committed to engaging with and listening to self-advocates/autistics/individuals with autism, families, and other stakeholders to continuously advance the application of ABA within and beyond our organization.