

Applied Behavior Analysis Program for Preschool, Elementary and Secondary Students with Autism

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Updated (01/19/05)

1. What is applied behavior analysis?

Applied behavior analysis (ABA) is the application of behavioral principles to shape behaviors and teach new skills. Behaviors are observed and analyzed to determine their function. The antecedents and consequences (events preceding and subsequent to the behavior) are analyzed and manipulated in an effort to shape or change behavior. Skills are broken down into small, discrete steps and taught systematically.

2. What are some of the key elements of an ABA program?

ABA programs emphasize the importance of looking at the ABC's (antecedents, behaviors, and consequences) of behaviors, teaching new behaviors, and developing systematic instructional plans to teach new skills. Skills are broken down into small units through a task analysis. ABA programs teach skills through the use of reinforcement, shaping, prompting, fading, chaining, extinction, and discrimination. Data collection and analysis is an important component of an ABA program. Data is used to measure progress on the acquisition of new behaviors and new skills.

3. What is a verbal behavior program?

A verbal behavior program utilizes the basic principles of ABA with a focus on teaching verbal behavior as defined by B.F. Skinner's Analysis of Verbal Behavior. Talking, signing, picture systems, and other augmentative communication systems are all forms of verbal behavior. Verbal behavior programs use a behavioral classification system for language that identifies verbal operants or functional units of language. These include: mands (requests); tacts (labels); echoic (vocal imitation); motor imitation; receptive language; and intraverbals (answering questions, conversation). In a verbal behavior program, the mand repertoire is taught early on in programming by using words that are highly motivating to the child as the targets. Each target word is taught across the verbal operants or assessed to determine that generalization occurred across the different functions/operants. Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) is enhancing its ABA services to include verbal behavior.

4. What skills can be taught using ABA?

ABA programs focus on the development of comprehensive skills including language skills, social skills, play or leisure skills, motor skills, academic skills, and self help skills. Language skills are critical for independent functioning, cognitive growth, and social development, and are a key component in the FCPS ABA/VB program. Social, play, and leisure skills are also important and enhance a child's quality of life. Self help skills build independence and academic skills help a child access the general education curriculum.

5. Do ABA teaching procedures limit generalization and transfer of skills?

Well designed ABA teaching programs result in positive outcomes that are durable over time and generalize to new situations. FCPS uses a structured ABA approach which allows for flexibility to meet each student's needs and emphasizes teaching in the natural environment.

6. What ABA teaching procedures will facilitate generalization and transfer of skills?

Teaching procedures should be systematic, yet flexible to meet the individual needs of the students. For students to be successful in a variety of environments, intervention must be as natural as possible and take place in different instructional formats including small and large group settings. FCPS teachers look at the individual needs of students when making instructional decisions such as the complexity of language used with the student, the reinforcement schedule, the types of reinforcement, or the specific skills to be taught.

7. Why is data collection and analysis so important?

It is important to collect and analyze data to measure student progress, evaluate the effectiveness of the student's individual program, and to identify skills and/or behaviors that need to be taught. There are a variety of data collection methods such as continuous data procedures and time sampling procedures that yield reliable, accurate, and valid data. FCPS uses a variety of data collection methods to measure progress including probe data, time sampling recording procedures, and trial by trial data probes.

8. What is the process for determining whether a student may need additional 1:1 assistance?

The committee of parents and school staff members who collaboratively developed the model for enhancing autism services at the preschool and elementary levels acknowledges that the goal for all students is independence in both school and community settings. However, recognizing that students with autism may have significant needs that impact their learning and that of other students, the model provides for additional instructional support when students evidence significantly intense behaviors that make them unavailable for learning. In such cases, a referral may be made for consideration of temporary, short-term 1:1 assistance. The goal of such assistance would be to reduce the behaviors that are interfering with the student's ability to benefit from his/her educational program. The referral will be considered by a team that includes the principal, classroom teacher, and ABA coach. This team will review the concerns and make a determination of need by considering the impact of the behaviors on instruction and learning. Because of the enriched staffing already allocated to these classrooms and the additional support provided to the school staff from the ABA coaches, parents who believe that such assistance is required for the children are encouraged to give school staff a period of time at the beginning of the year to implement the program and develop interventions to address concerns. If, after several weeks, parents continue to believe their child is in need of 1:1 support they may contact the classroom teacher who will provide a referral form to initiate considerations.

9. What is an ABA coach and how will he or she support the needs of students with autism?

ABA coaches are teachers who have advanced technical skills and knowledge in the application of ABA/VB principles. Each coach will be assigned to support a group of preschool and elementary autism classes within a geographic area. The ABA coaches will visit classes on a regular basis to assist teachers in designing and delivering ABA/VB services to students. The coaches will also be available to provide training to staff, as needed.

10. Who are the outside consultants providing support to the FCPS autism classes?

FCPS currently has two outside consulting groups who provide training and support to school staff. Over the last two years, Ron Leaf, Ph.D and his associates from Autism Partnership have consulted with FCPS on a monthly basis. Autism Partnership has provided training on ABA

principles, discrete trial teaching, curriculum development, and data analysis through a variety of didactic and hands-on workshops. Todd Streff, Great Strides Behavioral Consulting Inc, has recently joined the team and brings his knowledge and expertise in the area of verbal behavior. He will provide training and support to school staff as FCPS enhances its ABA services to include verbal behavior.

11. What curriculum resources and assessment tools are used by FCPS autism teachers?

FCPS uses the Early Academic Curriculum Guide, which was developed by FCPS staff with support from Todd Streff, Great Strides Behavioral Consulting Inc. and with resources provided by Ron Leaf, Ph.D., Autism Partnership. The curriculum guide includes a comprehensive skill list, an assessment checklist, and data forms to measure progress and skill acquisition. The Assessment of Basic Language Learning Skills (ABLLS) will be used to educate all autism staff and parents on the functional units of language within a verbal behavior framework. As FCPS enhances its ABA services with the addition of verbal behavior, teachers and ABA coaches will be trained and knowledgeable about the ABLLS and may use it as an additional resource to guide curriculum selection. Training provided by FCPS consultants to staff working with students with autism emphasizes selecting curriculum based on individual student needs rather than relying exclusively on a single instrument. FCPS autism teachers also administer the Brigance Diagnostic Inventory in the fall and in the spring to assess student performance.

12. What training opportunities are available for parents of children with autism and FCPS autism staff?

The FCPS consultants will be here for one week each month during the school year and will provide training and workshops for both parents and FCPS autism staff. Parent workshops will be offered on a monthly basis. The dates, times, and locations for these workshops will be posted on the website. FCPS autism staff will participate in monthly trainings that will focus on specific ABA/VB topics. Training for the FCPS autism staff will include lectures on specific subjects, hands-on training with students, and on-site consultations with the FCPS consultants and the ABA coaches. In addition, there will also be some joint workshops for both parents and FCPS autism staff.

13. Which schools will be receiving the full range of support through the enhanced ABA?

Below is a list of schools that will receive support through the enhanced ABA services (ABA teacher coach support, enhanced staffing

ratio, and Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and Verbal Behavior (VB) training. Staff members who teach students with autism at schools not on this list will continue to participate in a variety of staff development workshops and will continue to receive support from the Office of Special Education.

14. Question: Can private ABA service providers observe in a classroom?

Collaboration between home ABA providers and school teams is important for fostering student progress and facilitating generalization of skills. Parents wishing to have their home ABA consultants observe in their child's classroom should request that visit through the principal. Each school has procedures and policies for classroom visits designed to maintain the integrity and continuity of the instructional program. The principal will coordinate the visit and contact the ABA coach who will accompany the consultant during the classroom observation. The ABA coach will also be available to meet with the home ABA consultant immediately following the observation to answer any questions. Since one of the primary responsibilities of the ABA coaches is to make recommendations to classroom teachers, the coaches will follow-up with teachers after the classroom visit and will take into consideration the information discussed during the debriefing.

15. How is verbal behavior being integrated in to the curriculum?

The Early Academic Curriculum Guide uses a verbal behavior framework for analyzing language. Teachers are encouraged to use this guide to identify appropriate goals and objectives in the language/communication area. In a VB approach there is an emphasis on helping students make spontaneous, independent requests and on their ability to use signs/words/or pictures across each of the different functions (request, receptive label, expressive label, etc). A curriculum planning form has been developed and provided to each teacher. This planning form provides a systematic way to integrate the different functions of language into activities or units.

16. What if a student in the autism classroom has significant behavioral concerns?

The teacher or principal should contact the ABA coach. Depending on the severity of the behavior, the ABA coach will either gather data and develop an informal behavior plan or will complete a formal, functional behavior assessment (FBA) and write a behavior intervention plan (BIP). In either case, the ABA coach will ask the staff to gather data

about the antecedents, the behavior (frequency, intensity, or duration), and the consequences following the behavior. This data is critical in forming a hypothesis to identify the function(s) of the behavior and determine the appropriate interventions. Once the data is gathered, the ABA coach will develop a behavior plan. Behavior plans should be shared and reviewed with all members of the team. The implementation of a behavior plan requires consistency and support from the team including the family. Data will continue to be gathered to assess the effectiveness of the plan.