



The ABCs of ABA therapy

By Janice Youngwith

“My child has autism.”

It’s a hard concept for most to grasp as stunned and often perplexed parents ponder not only the future, but more pressing and immediate concerns about a child’s behaviors, language and communication.

Many parents report that with the plethora of early treatment options and the individualized nature of autism, finding what works for their child with an autism spectrum disorder means navigating a challenging maze with plenty of stops and false starts.

The Cleveland family of Wheaton is no exception to navigating treatment mazes. Sue Cleveland, a nurse and mother of two, says finding the best help for her 3-year-old daughter, Taylor, was indeed challenging.

She recalls her now-9-year-old daughter graduating from early intervention programming at age 3, and how it became immediately apparent additional help was needed.

“We turned to Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy to help in so many parts of Taylor’s life and ours,” says Cleveland, who notes things like two-hour tantrums and the inability to sit at the table for even a minute had a big impact on family life.

In addition to her half-day preschool program and outpatient speech and occupational therapy, Taylor began working one-on-one at home for up to 40 hours a week with an ABA intervention specialist.

ABA is a field of psychology where behavior is shaped and learned based on reinforcement and consequences. Because children with an autism spectrum disorder don’t necessarily tune into things in the environment, developing cognitive skills can be challenging, say many behavior experts who add parent coaching and sibling interaction often is a key component of a home-based ABA intervention program.

“Initially in the first months, behavior modifications were the focus,” recalls Taylor’s mom, who reports committing to the therapy program from ages 3 to 7. “Later it became more of an educational focus, shifting to accommodate Taylor’s needs — learning patterns of reading and catch up to her school-age peers, making eye contact when speaking and developing social skills like taking turns, learning rules and making conversation.”

Cleveland cautions, “It takes the entire family to follow what is taught



COURTESY OF CLEVELAND FAMILY

For Taylor Cleveland, now 9, of Wheaton, applied behavior analysis therapy helped her learn skills needed to cope with her autism.

and to bring the guidelines and learning into daily home life. The rules the child must follow during ABA sessions need to be followed at all times, not just during therapy.”

ABCs of ABA Therapy

Using ABA to treat autism is not new and not a fad, according to Leah Adamik, a board-certified behavior analyst and clinical director at Elmhurst-based Total Spectrum, who points to research which began in the early 1960s with the studies of pioneers like Charles Ferster, Ivar Lovaas, Montrose Wolf and Todd Risely. To date hundreds of studies have been published in scientific journals showing the effectiveness of behavior analytic procedures for those with autism.

Today, certified master’s level ABA consultants like Adamik are called upon to develop an individualized program for each child, train families and monitor staff in administering home-based ABA therapy programs.

“ABA is a data-driven method and regular charting of behavior and skills helps objectively determine progress and how to advance the child’s program,” explains Adamik. In her program, therapists armed with iPad technology and Catalyst Datafinch applications are able to track and measure individual progress, or tap into pictures systems or other resources to address client need.

The applied behavior analysis approach to treating autism often involves both skill-building and behavior support, according to Adamik, who says clients typically range from 2 to 7 years of age, with her oldest client



COURTESY OF BY YOUR SIDE

By Your Side Autism Therapy Services, with locations in Burr Ridge and Schaumburg, uses applied behavior analysis with clients.

now age 18. The intensive home-based therapy program also allows therapists an opportunity to provide family education, and ongoing parent support.

Although ABA does provide methods for managing problem and aberrant behavior such as self-injurious, ritualistic, repetitive, aggressive and disruptive behavior, the focus is through teaching alternative pro-social behaviors.

“Everything from academics to toilet training to dressing, bathing, tooth brushing, social skills and more is broken down into the smallest possible steps,” she explains.

On the flip side, Adamik says skills learned at home can be generalized later for use in the community, at school, in restaurants, at the park, grocery stores, and in other social settings.

“Moms and dads can do a lot, but having a specially trained ABA specialist using a data-driven and evidence-based programs can be life-changing for the entire family,” reports Adamik, who says ABA is the only therapy recommended by the surgeon general for children with autism.

“The intensive nature of ABA is very effective and can slowly aid in the transition to other areas of need, with providers guiding clients through new challenges and community settings.”

Focus on intervention increases

According to Jessie Topalov, board-certified behavior analyst and executive director at Instructional ABA Consultants, Naperville, ABA has grown in the community because of the rise in autism, and is effective with any behavior.

“ABA is the only empirically based treatment for children with autism, and treatment during the 18 month to age 5 years is critical,” says Topalov, whose consulting firm provides in-home therapy and opened a specialized ABA clinic March 1 in Naperville. “But, ABA is effective at changing behavior and improving skills across the life span. Over the last 50 years, ABA treatment has been widely used and proven effective for individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities.”

Topalov, who works with clients of all ages including many young adults from Aspire Careers, Hillside, says intensity and duration of treatment matter — at least 30 hours per week of one-to-one intervention for more than a year produces the best outcomes, as does two or more years of intervention.

Frequent requests for specific skill training include learning readiness, verbal behavior, academics, leisure skills, social skills and daily living skills.

Never too old to learn new skills

Katurri Phillips, a board-certified behavior analyst who serves as clinical director for ABA services at By Your Side, a west and northwest suburban autism therapy center with locations in both Burr Ridge and Schaumburg, says vital early learning skills mastered by ABA intervention become the building blocks for later skill development.

“You’re never too old to learn new skills and adapt to new settings,” notes Phillips, who finds success in drawing from her experience with applied behavioral analysis (ABA), and the combination of therapies involving discrete trial, verbal behavior,



picture communication systems, and structured teaching. “For those with autism or an autism spectrum disorder, learning isn’t incidental. A more deliberate combination of contextual styles is needed, especially for those anticipating life changes such as a new school environment or the end of school, new skill sets are needed for daily living, to manage a job or community integration.”

Because the world is made of language, new social communication roles chock full of body language, idioms, non-spoken language clues, facial expressions, sarcasm and new terms, experts say it’s no wonder so many with an autism spectrum disorders struggle to adapt.

New environments like a job, new friend group or a new social recreational activity may require learning a new language, technical terms and previously unfamiliar acronyms,” explains Kathryn Neenan, a speech-language pathologist who directs



COURTESY OF BY YOUR SIDE

By Your Side offers applied behavior analysis therapy in addition to language enhancement to children and young adults with autism.

the speech and occupational therapy programs at By Your Side, and whose experience includes working with clients with both moderate and more severe forms of autism. “But for those with autism who often communicate

in a straightforward, literal manner, navigating communication in these environments can be especially challenging.”

In addition to ABA intervention services, many with autism spectrum disorders

also are enrolled in life language learner programs at the By Your Side autism communication center in Burr Ridge and Schaumburg. In addition to the growing numbers of 2- and 3-year-olds diagnosed with autism, the agency

reports growing numbers of older children and young adults seeking to develop and enhance language needs of all types.

Both individual ABA intervention and social/language skill group opportunities are offered in a variety of natural settings within the centers including a dedicated instruction room, kitchen, activity room and within the community at offered at By Your Side, an autism therapy center dedicated to teaching children and young adults with autism language concepts, communication strategies and social skills to cope and communicate within the demands of everyday life.

For more information

For information on autism spectrum disorders or various community providers, support, information and resources, contact the Autism Society of Illinois, 2200 S. Main St., Suite 203, Lombard at (630) 691-1270 or email info@autismillinois.org.

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