

ABA Terms for Parents

A plain-language guide to the words your child's ABA team uses — so you always feel informed.

The Basics

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)

Therapy that uses how behavior works to teach helpful skills and ease behaviors that get in the way.

Behavior

Anything your child does that we can see, hear, or measure.

Function

The reason a behavior happens — usually attention, access, escape, or how it feels.

Antecedent

What happens right before a behavior — the trigger, cue, or request.

Consequence

What happens right after a behavior, making it more or less likely next time.

Target Behavior

The specific skill or behavior the team is focused on right now.

Reinforcement & Behavior

Reinforcement

Adding or removing something right after a behavior so it happens more often.

Positive Reinforcement

Giving something your child likes after a behavior to strengthen it.

Differential Reinforcement

Rewarding a helpful behavior while not rewarding the one we want to reduce.

Token Economy

Earning tokens for target behaviors that are later traded for a reward.

Reinforcer

The thing your child will work for — a toy, snack, praise, or activity.

Extinction

No longer giving the payoff a behavior used to earn, so it gradually fades.

Replacement Behavior

A better skill taught to do the same job — like asking instead of grabbing.

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ABA Terms for Parents

Teaching methods you'll hear about, and the people on your child's team.

Teaching Methods

Prompt

Help given to guide a correct response — a gesture, a model, or hand-over-hand.

Prompt Fading

Slowly reducing help so your child performs the skill independently.

Discrete Trial Training (DTT)

Teaching in short, clear, repeated steps: a cue, a response, then a reward.

Natural Environment Teaching (NET)

Teaching skills during play and everyday routines.

Shaping

Rewarding small steps that get closer and closer to the full skill.

Chaining / Task Analysis

Breaking a skill into small steps and teaching them in order, like handwashing.

Generalization

Using a skill across new people, places, and materials — not just where it was taught.

Mastery Criteria

The goal that shows a skill is truly learned, such as 80% across three days.

Communication & Your Team

Manding

Requesting — asking for what you want. A powerful early communication skill.

First-Then

A simple “first do this, then get that” strategy that supports cooperation.

Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA)

A process to understand why a behavior happens before building a plan.

BCBA

Board Certified Behavior Analyst — designs and oversees your child's program.

RBT

Registered Behavior Technician — works directly with your child under the BCBA.