

# Autism

## CLASSROOM SUCCESS WITH APPLIED BEHAVIOUR ANALYSIS

By using Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), teachers can make positive and meaningful changes in the lives of their students, including teaching new skills and reducing interfering behaviour. Extensive evidence demonstrates that ABA significantly improves outcomes, particularly for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This guide is designed as a quick-reference tool for teachers and paraprofessionals using ABA in their inclusive and special education classrooms. It is also a useful resource for teachers and parents as they consult with certified behaviour analysts. Written by experienced special education teachers who are also certified behaviour analysts, this guide reviews the key features of ABA and offers examples of how to apply it in classroom settings.

### What is ABA?

**Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA)** is the process of systematically using principles of learning theory to develop interventions for improving socially significant behaviours, such as conversing with others, reading, solving maths problems, sitting still in class and many other important skills for succeeding in school. ABA is a data-driven approach that involves closely observing target behaviours in their context, examining the effects of the antecedents and consequences of those behaviours, and manipulating the antecedents and consequences to produce a meaningful change. At the core of ABA is the A-B-C chain:

- **A**ntecedent – What happens before the behaviour occurs.
- **B**ehaviour – An observable, measurable action.
- **C**onsequence – What happens after the behaviour occurs.

ABA is used to

- teach new skills,
- maintain and generalise productive or appropriate behaviours, and
- decrease or extinguish interfering (e.g. off-task, disruptive, inappropriate) behaviours.

#### The Seven Dimensions of ABA

Baer, Wolf and Risley (1968) identify the following fundamental characteristics of ABA (*Note that the terms "interventions" and "teaching practices" are used interchangeably*):

- **Applied** – Interventions have a meaningful, positive impact on behaviours.
- **Behavioural** – Behaviours are defined so observers can measure them consistently.
- **Analytic** – Data are examined to establish whether the interventions are the cause of the change in behaviour.
- **Technological** – Teaching procedures are written in enough detail to be implemented consistently.
- **Conceptually Systematic** – Interventions are based on learning principles, not tricks.
- **Effective** – Interventions produce significant changes.
- **Generalisable** – Behaviour changes are maintained over time and in environments.

### What is Autism?

**Autism** is a spectrum disorder, meaning that there is a wide degree of variation in the way it affects people. Some individuals with autism have mild differences, while others have significant disabilities. In some cases, those with autism may have exceptional abilities in a particular area. Individuals on the autism spectrum have varying difficulties in the areas of:

- Social interaction and communication, such as
  - ~ initiating or responding to social interactions;
  - ~ understanding and using non-verbal communicative behaviours; and
  - ~ developing, maintaining and understanding relationships.
- Behaviour, such as:
  - ~ speaking, moving or using objects in a way that is repetitive or stereotypical;
  - ~ insisting on sameness;
  - ~ being inflexible or rigidly following routines;
  - ~ adhering to ritualised patterns of verbal or non-verbal behaviour; and
  - ~ possessing limited interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus.

### What are Behaviours?

Behaviours are observable, measurable actions. They may be either

- **productive skills** (such as making requests, greeting others, reading and writing) that we want to teach or increase; **OR**
- **interfering activities** (such as screaming, hitting, running away) that we want to decrease.

To use ABA, behaviours must be

- **clearly defined** using descriptive verbs so they can be measured reliably (consistently over time and by different observers); **AND**
- **examined in context** to determine whether the goal is to increase and strengthen them, maintain them or decrease/weaken them. For example, the context determines whether we set a goal to decrease running (around the classroom) OR increase running (during tag on the playground).

