

## ABA – further information

### What is ABA?

ABA (Applied Behaviour Analysis) is a way of teaching children with autism or other learning difficulties, by working out what it is that will motivate him or her to learn, and breaking every task down into small, achievable steps.

ABA has a rich scientific history in assisting those with developmental disabilities and there is a vast body of research, spanning four decades, documenting the effectiveness of ABA for children with autism. Indeed a number of systematic reviews of evidence-based practices in autism conclude that ABA input in the early years for children with autism has the strongest evidence base of any comprehensive intervention (Eldevik et al, 2009; Rogers, 2008).

ABA programmes for children with autism are based on an analysis of what motivates an individual child to behave in certain ways. Each skill the child needs to learn is broken down into small, achievable steps. Each step is worked on in a systematic and consistent way, using appropriate “reinforcement” or rewards to encourage the behaviours needed for future learning. Evidence and data are collected of the child’s progress, so that targets and motivators can be adjusted along the way according to what is and isn’t working for the particular child. Reinforcement systems – which seek to link desired behaviour with good outcomes from the child’s point of view - are particularly important for children with autism, given they may lack the ‘social desire to please’ that is often present in a normally-functioning child. **ABA teaches an autistic child how to learn**, and can therefore be applied to the widest range of skills – from speech and language, self-care and motor skills, right through to reading and writing.

ABA is carried out either via home programmes run by a qualified ABA consultant and supervisor, or in a growing number of ABA schools in the UK. At Rainbow we use a branch of ABA called Verbal Behaviour (VB) which focuses on communication skills.

ABA as a method of education for children with autism is likely to grow significantly in the UK. If we follow countries such as the US and Canada, it is probable that the evidence base supporting ABA will lead to its establishment as a standard treatment for children with autism. Although small-scale at present in the UK, there is a growing demand for ABA at a ‘grass-roots’ level from families whose children have been diagnosed with autism, and who have undertaken research as to which treatments will provide the best outcomes for their children.

### What does an ABA approach to teaching children with autism look like?

- **Individualised teaching programmes** aimed at teaching behaviours and skills that will be significant and functional to the individual child. These are determined by an assessment of the pupil’s current needs rather than a prescribed curriculum.

- **Use of task analysis to break down skills into achievable targets.** Teaching based on a task analysis allows children to learn difficult and complex behaviours step by step.
- **Use of data to measure achievement and success of teaching methods.** Detailed data is collected on learning targets as well as behaviour throughout the day. This is then used to assess the pupil's progress on an on-going basis and ensures consistency across teaching staff.
- **Highly structured teaching interactions** aimed at maximising a pupil's opportunities to respond and actively participate in learning. Teaching is broken down into discrete trials, aimed at eliciting very specific responses. These trials are repeated throughout the day until the pupil reaches a specified criteria for success.
- **Use of positive reinforcement** to promote correct and appropriate responses. In order to be effective, this reinforcement must be immediate and sufficiently motivating to the individual at the time. What each child/young person experiences as reinforcing is individual and constantly changing. The overall aim is to reduce the frequency of reinforcement and move towards less tangible and more natural, social reinforcement.
- **Consistent responses to appropriate and inappropriate behaviours** based on the function of the behaviour.
- **Use of prompting** to maximise success during learning of new skills. When learning new skills, the pupil is prompted in such a way, that errors are avoided as far as possible to prevent confusion and loss of motivation. These prompts are then carefully faded until the pupil is able to respond independently.
- **Generalisation and maintenance of learnt skills.** Previously learnt skills are frequently revisited in individual and group lessons. This creates momentum during teaching and ensures that knowledge is retained. In teaching new skills, we aim to teach many examples and present concepts in as functional and meaningful a way as possible, to ensure each concept is generalised. Teaching occurs across a variety of stimuli, teachers and where appropriate, environments to further promote generalisation. Parents are also encouraged to play a role in this. As each pupil's skills increase, the aim is to move towards more natural and varied language during instruction, more natural levels and types of reinforcement, a varied pace of instruction and the ability to learn in small group settings.
- **Intensive and regular training and supervision of teaching staff.** In order to deliver the precision and consistency described above, it is essential that teaching staff are given comprehensive and on-going training of both a theoretical and practical nature by more senior staff with qualifications and experience in using ABA with children with autism. Specific teaching strategies are explained and demonstrated and then observed with feedback provided. Teaching and behaviour plans are developed and monitored by senior staff who are accredited or working towards accreditation by the Behaviour Analyst Certification Board.