
Consumer Guidelines

for Identifying, Selecting, and Evaluating Behavior Analysts
Working with Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Autism Special Interest Group (SIG) of the Association for Behavior Analysis



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The Autism Special Interest Group (SIG) of the Association for Behavior Analysis asserts that all children and adults with autism spectrum disorders have the right to effective education and treatment based on the best available scientific evidence. Unfortunately, many interventions for autism have not been shown to be effective in sound research; others have been shown to be ineffective or harmful.¹ Research has long documented the effectiveness of applied behavior analysis (ABA) methods in the education and treatment of people with autism.² Although it is beyond the scope of these guidelines, the Autism SIG urges consumers to inquire about scientific support for all autism treatments. The Association for Science in Autism Treatment and the Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies host websites that provide consumers with a wealth of information about autism treatments (please visit www.asaonline.org and www.behavior.org). For more information on these Guidelines, please visit www.autismsig.org.

Consumer Advisory: All consumers should exercise caution when selecting service providers for individuals with autism. Furthermore, consumers are urged to obtain references from all potential service providers and to check those references carefully. Consumers are strongly encouraged to report unprofessional and unethical behavior to the appropriate regulatory bodies including the state consumer affairs bureau and, if the individual is certified by the Behavior Analyst Certification Board® (BACB®), the BACB®.

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This document suggests guidelines for consumers to use in determining who may be qualified to direct applied behavior analysis programs for individuals with autism, as recommended by the Autism Special Interest Group of the Association for Behavior Analysis International. The Association for Behavior Analysis, its members and Executive Council have not adopted an official policy, position, or opinion regarding these Guidelines.

The Autism Special Interest Group (SIG) of the Association for Behavior Analysis International (ABAI) first developed guidelines to help consumers identify professionals who are qualified to design and oversee applied behavior analysis (ABA) interventions for people with autism in 1998. This is the fourth edition of the guidelines. It incorporates recent developments in research, professional credentialing, and public policies affecting ABA services for people with autism and related disorders (hereafter, "autism") into a set of criteria in the form of a checklist for consumers.

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Section I: Qualifications to Supervise Behavior Analytic Services for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders

The Autism SIG strongly recommends that consumers seek evidence of all of the following qualifications from professionals who will be charged with designing and overseeing ABA interventions for autism, including developing intervention plans and curricula, training staff and family members to implement ABA assessment and intervention procedures, supervising implementation of intervention plans, and evaluating the performance of implementers:

I. Valid Professional Credentials/Indicators of Expertise to Practice Applied Behavior Analysis

Effective and ethical development and supervision of ABA interventions require advanced training and competence in ABA that is evidenced by one of the following:

- A. Current certification as a Board Certified Behavior Analyst® (BCBA®) or a Board Certified Behavior Analyst-Doctoral® (BCBA-D®) by the Behavior Analyst Certification Board® (BACB®). Certification status should be verified by going to the BACB website (bacb.com), clicking "Find a Certificant" and searching for the individual's name.

OR

- B. Current licensure as an independent practitioner of behavior analysis (but not as an assistant behavior analyst or behavior technician) where the licensing requirements are no less stringent than the certification requirements for the BCBA credential, and the practice of behavior analysis is regulated by entities consisting of a majority of BCBA -credentialed behavior analysts. Licensure status should be verified with the governmental agency (e.g., state or provincial licensing board) that licenses behavior analysts.

NOTES: The BACB also certifies Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analysts (BCaBA®), but those certificants must be supervised by BCBA's or BCBA-D's and are not qualified to independently design and oversee ABA interventions.

The SIG strongly advises consumers to be aware that other non-accredited credentials, degrees, and titles are not equivalent to the BCBA credential or governmental licensure as a behavior analyst.

In addition to these two paths (BCBA credential and licensure as a behavior analyst), there are other degrees of formal education that are less preferred and which do not necessarily meet the standards of the BACB. Therefore, consumers should approach individuals with these alternate credentials with a higher degree of caution.

OR

- C. Current licensure as a psychologist, verified with the government agency that licenses psychologists
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(e.g., state or provincial psychology licensing board), AND documentation that the psychologist's scope of practice and scope of training and competence include ABA. Such documentation could include: certification in cognitive and behavioral psychology by the American Board of Professional Psychology, along with transcripts and syllabi showing that the psychologist has completed graduate level coursework and supervised experiential training that is comparable to the requirements to sit for the BCBA examination.

OR

- D. Completion of a graduate program (masters or doctoral) that has been accredited by ABAI. A list of programs meeting the ABAI accreditation standards can be found at http://www.abainternational.org/BA/education/Accredited_programs.asp. ABAI accreditation indicates that the program has met the ABAI standards for in-depth education in behavior analysis and training in the theoretical underpinnings of the science of behavior analysis. Documentation could include transcripts and syllabi showing that the behavior analyst has completed graduate level coursework and supervised experiential training that is comparable to the requirements to sit for the BCBA examination..

The SIG strongly advises consumers to be aware that credentials such as "certifications" issued by individuals or by organizations that are not accredited by the National Commission on Certifying Agencies or the American National Standards Institute are not equivalent to BCBA® certification or governmental licensure as a behavior analyst. Relatedly, degrees from colleges or universities are not professional credentials. To obtain a valid professional credential an individual must typically document to a certifying or licensing entity that s/he has a degree or degrees, specified coursework, and a specified amount of supervised experiential training, AND must demonstrate knowledge of the subject matter by passing a professionally designed objective examination.

Section II: Training and Experience (in ABA Interventions for People with Autism)

A. The credentialed professional should provide documentation that s/he successfully completed:

(a) at least one full calendar year (full time equivalent of 1000 clock hours; approximately 25 hours/week for 40 weeks) of hands-on training in the delivery of ABA services directly to people with autism under the supervision of a professional with one of the credentials described in I above;

AND

(b) at least 5 years of experience in delivering ABA services to individuals with autism under the supervision of a professional with one of the credentials described in 1 above. The supervised experiential training should be designed to develop the following competencies:

- Using assessment and intervention methods that have been demonstrated to be effective for people with autism in peer-reviewed scientific studies.
 - Conducting scientific evaluations of assessment and intervention methods that have not yet been demonstrated to be effective.
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- Designing and implementing individualized ABA interventions for people with autism in each of the following areas:
 - ✓ community living skills
 - ✓ functional communication skills (vocal and non-vocal)
 - ✓ “learning to learn” skills (e.g., looking, listening, following instructions, imitating)
 - ✓ motor skills
 - ✓ personal safety skills
 - ✓ play and leisure skills
 - ✓ pre-academic and academic skills
 - ✓ reduction of behaviors that jeopardize health and safety and impede successful functioning (e.g., stereotypic, obsessive, ritualistic, aggressive, self-injurious, disruptive, and other behaviors often described as “challenging”).
 - ✓ school readiness skills
 - ✓ self-care skills
 - ✓ self- management skills
 - ✓ social interaction skills
 - ✓ vocational skills

AND

B. The credentialed professional should also provide documentation of experience and competence in the following:

- Designing and implementing both comprehensive ABA intervention programs (using multiple ABA procedures to address multiple intervention targets) and focused interventions (using one or more ABA procedures to address a small number of intervention targets) .
- Delivering ABA interventions directly to at least 8 individuals with autism who present with a range of repertoires, levels of functioning, and ages.
- Implementing the full range of scientifically validated behavior analytic procedures, including but not limited to:
 - ✓ reinforcement (including differential reinforcement)
 - ✓ extinction
 - ✓ discrete-trial procedures
 - ✓ modeling (including video modeling)
 - ✓ incidental teaching and other “naturalistic” methods
 - ✓ activity-embedded intervention
 - ✓ task analysis
 - ✓ chaining
 - ✓ activity schedules
 - ✓ scripts and script fading
 - ✓ prompting and prompt-fading
 - ✓ errorless training
 - ✓ error correction
 - ✓ motivating operations

- ✓ stimulus control
- ✓ preference assessments
- ✓ choice
- ✓ augmentative and alternative communication training procedures
- Using ABA procedures in one-to-one (one adult to one learner), small group, and large group intervention formats
- Implementing scientifically validated effective procedures for promoting generalization of behavior change across time, individuals, settings, situations, and materials.
- Modifying intervention procedures based on frequent, systematic evaluation of graphic displays of data obtained through repeated direct observation and measurement of behavior.
- Conducting functional assessments (including experimental functional analyses) of challenging behavior in order to systematically analyze environmental variables (antecedents and consequences) that occasion and maintain the behavior and to develop intervention procedures.
- Using ABA principles and procedures (modeling, rehearsal, feedback, etc.) to train family members of at least 5 individuals with autism to implement ABA intervention procedures competently, with data documenting behavior change in the family members and the individuals with autism.
- Using ABA principles and procedures (modeling, rehearsal, feedback, etc.) to train at least 8 professionals, paraprofessionals, and/or students to implement ABA intervention procedures competently with individuals with autism, with data documenting behavior change in the trainees and the individuals with autism.
- Collaborating effectively and respectfully with professionals from other disciplines and with family members to promote effective intervention and to maximize outcomes, while maintaining a commitment to scientifically validated interventions and data-based decision making.

Section III: Ongoing Training

Appropriately credentialed professional practitioners are required to have formal and experiential training in their discipline in order to obtain the credential, and must obtain continuing education in order to maintain their credentials; however, that training may not cover the knowledge and skills required to design and oversee effective ABA interventions for people with autism. Professionals who are charged with doing that should meet the criteria in Section I above and should also provide documentation of training and ongoing professional development in the following areas:

- The best available scientific evidence about autism and related disorders and implications for designing and implementing interventions for people with autism and their families.
 - Valid and reliable instruments for screening and diagnosing autism, and for evaluating functioning in people with autism.
 - Ethical and professional behavior, including compliance with relevant professional ethical and disciplinary standards (for BACB certificants, the BACB Guidelines for Responsible Conduct for Behavior Analysts and Professional Disciplinary and Ethical Standards; for licensed psychologists with qualifications in ABA, the Code of Ethics of the American Psychological Association).
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Curricula for learners with autism consisting of: (1) a scope and sequence of skills based on normal developmental milestones and broken down into component skills; (2) prototype programs for developing each skill using behavior analytic procedures; (3) data recording and tracking systems; and (4) accompanying materials, all derived from peer-reviewed scientific research.

- Local, state/province, and federal laws and regulations affecting the practice of ABA with people with autism, including laws and regulations regarding informed consent, privacy, mandated reporting, and physical intervention.
- The best available scientific evidence from behavior analysis and other disciplines on assessment and intervention procedures for people with autism.

NOTES: Training in the areas listed above may occur during and after formal education. The Autism SIG encourages consumers to ask professionals for evidence that they have recently participated in continuing education relevant to assessments and interventions for people with autism to whom they will be providing services (e.g., preschoolers, adults, individuals with limited vocal-verbal repertoires, individuals who exhibit challenging behaviors).

Section IV: Other Considerations

Where consumers have identified an appropriately credentialed professional (see above), the following list could be used to obtain more detailed information about that potential provider's breadth and depth of knowledge:

- Current membership in the Association for Behavior Analysis International and possibly one of its regional chapters, membership of the Association of Professional Behavior Analysts (APBA), APA Division 25, or membership of other regional or country specific ABA organizations.
- At least ten years of professional experience (post-master's or doctoral degree) in implementing, designing, and overseeing behavior analysis services for individuals with autism.
- Publications of research on the behavior-analytic intervention in autism in peer-reviewed professional journals (as opposed to self-published books and journals, websites, and other non-peer-reviewed publications).
- Presentations on the behavior-analytic intervention with autism at behavior analysis conferences (but note that conference presentations are not equivalent to peer-reviewed research and only represent ongoing professional development).

One resource for identifying the specific knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to design and deliver effective ABA services to people with autism and their families is the BACB's Autism Task List, available at www.BACB.com.

The Autism SIG recommends that consumers of ABA services DO NOT work with professionals who implement ABA as well as other interventions for autism that have not been demonstrated to be effective and safe in multiple scientifically sound studies. Such practices are inconsistent with behavior analytic principles and ethical standards, such as the BACB Guidelines for Responsible Conduct for Behavior Analysts. Professional behavior analysts should, however, use behavior analytic methods to evaluate the

effects of interventions that are said to be based on ABA and interventions that arise from other approaches and disciplines.

Checklist for Selecting a Qualified Professional to Supervise ABA Services for Individuals with ASD

Supervise Direct Interventions and Oversee Programs

	BCBA	BCBA-D	Licensed Psychologist	
Education (minimum)	Masters	Doctorate	Doctorate	
Training	1000 hours (25/week for 40 weeks)	1000 hours (25/week for 40 weeks)	ABAI -accredited program 1000 hours (25/week for 40 weeks)	
Experience with ABA (minimum)	5 years Obtain resume	5 years Obtain resume	10 years Obtain resume	
Licensure/Certification	Certification State licensure If Applicable	Certification State licensure If Applicable	Certification State licensure Must specify ABA within scope of practice	
Other/Notes	Member of ABAI Member APBA	Member of ABAI Member APBA	Member of ABAI Member APBA	

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