

UW INCLUDE Collaborative Position Statement: Applied Behavior Analysis

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and ABA-based therapy is one of the most discussed topics when considering supports for people with autism and intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). There is a considerable amount of discussion including strong and differing opinions related to the use of ABA and the history of its implementation. In the context of this complex history, the purpose of this document is to state our support of ABA for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)¹ and other related disabilities who would benefit from these services and supports.

The WA INCLUDE Collaborative², and its members respect the right of individuals with ASD and/or IDD to seek and choose intervention and treatment that is effective, acceptable, and culturally appropriate. There is a robust evidence base demonstrating the effectiveness of behavioral interventions to decrease interfering behaviors associated with ASD, teach valued behaviors to people with ASD, and result in an improved quality of life for people with ASD and their families (e.g., Asmus et al., 2004; Eldvick et al., 2009; Hanley et al., 2003; Reichow & Wolery, 2009; Virues-Ortega et al., 2022).

Our society has learned more about the value of diversity, equity, and inclusion over the years, including the role of neurodiversity and the contributions of people with different abilities and backgrounds. As this type of learning has evolved, a perspective has emerged that ABA has caused trauma in some autistic people who have experienced it. We acknowledge that treatment using ABA has caused trauma for some people with disabilities and those who have had these experiences should be listened to carefully. When ABA is done well it can be a critical support; however, there have been and continue to be examples of trauma from certain applications of ABA. As a team filled with professionals dedicated to providing the best care to their patients, we know that there is no one way to meet the needs of all people with ASD. We need to listen to and learn from recent criticisms of ABA as a therapy by the autistic community, and work with individuals with ASD and their families to navigate the evidence to find intervention options that are effective, responsive, and align with their beliefs, recognizing that ABA as a medical treatment is not appropriate or indicated for everyone.

ABA is an effective and powerful approach to teach people socially important behaviors that increase independence, access, and safety. Like all evidence-based intervention strategies, ABA

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²The INCLUDE Collaborative focuses on improving systems of care by supporting education, training, and connections within a growing community of champions.

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evolves as we learn more. Current areas of growth in the field include integrating trauma-informed care practices into behavioral assessment and treatment strategies, as well as issues related to consent and assent. Although there have been, and unfortunately will continue to be, some consumers who have negative experiences with behavioral interventions and interventionists, the goal of ABA is to use the power of behavioral principles to empower people with ASD and/or IDD to live their best lives. As members of the INCLUDE Collaborative navigate these situations, our team continues to advocate for accountability of ABA providers and agencies engaging in work resulting in negative outcomes for consumers, seeking to ensure the rights of individuals with disabilities accessing this intervention are respected.

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