

What is Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA)?

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Statement of the problem

There is a recent and common misconception that Applied Behaviour Analysis (or ABA) refers solely to an intervention for children with autism. This is not the case. ABA has been successfully applied for more than 50 years in many fields, including general education, special education, behavioural medicine and public health, organisational behaviour management and sports science. ABA is a scientific approach to behaviour change with the goal being to address socially significant problems for individuals, groups and society at large.

Proposed solution

It is proposed that greater attention be paid to disseminating and recognising the complete scope and practice of Applied Behaviour Analysis in order to develop greater awareness amongst parents and professionals regarding the empirically validated principles and procedures that make up this well documented science.

The theoretical rationale – how does it work?

Based on the operant psychology of B.F. Skinner and his associates, ABA was classically defined by Baer, Wolfe and Risley in 1968. ABA is a set of criteria by which the utility and effectiveness of interventions are judged, rather than a set of specific procedures or interventions. These criteria include that an intervention must be applied (address practical real world problems), behavioural (focus on change in behaviour) and analytic (provide a believable demonstration that change in behaviour is related to the intervention).

ABA provides a systematic approach to the assessment and evaluation of behaviour. It consists of well defined and empirically validated principles and procedures for assisting individuals to change behaviour and for teaching new skills. Features of ABA include assessment of the interaction between the behaviour and its environment, analysis of the purpose of a behaviour, and matching of interventions to these functions. Typically, interventions involve the manipulation of the antecedent events and/or consequences of behaviour.

What does the research say? What is the evidence for its efficacy?

Since 1968, the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* and many other publications have disseminated high quality behavioural research across a wide variety of educational and other settings, addressing numerous important social and educational questions. Fifty years of systematic research in families, homes, communities and schools has dramatically increased our understanding of behavioural principles and our ability to implement interventions successfully to address significant social problems in the real world.

Conclusion

ABA is a far more encompassing methodology of behaviour change and is not limited solely to application within in the field of autism. The ultimate goal in ABA is to achieve meaningful, lasting and generalised behaviour change that is socially significant to the individual.

Key references

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