

# Clinical Policy: Applied Behavior Analysis

Reference Number: CP.BH.104

Date of Last Revision: 05/21

[Coding Implications](#)

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See [Important Reminder](#) at the end of this policy for important regulatory and legal information.

## Description

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is the application of behavioral principles to everyday situations, intended to increase skills or decrease targeted behaviors. ABA has been used to improve areas such as language, self-help, and play skills, as well as decrease behaviors such as aggression, self-stimulatory behaviors, and self-injury. For those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), treatment may vary in terms of intensity and duration, complexity and treatment goals, and the extent of treatment provided, characterized as focused or comprehensive. Focused ABA is direct care provided for a limited number of behavioral targets. It is appropriate for those who need treatment only for a limited number of key functional skills or have such acute problem behavior that its treatment should be the priority. Comprehensive ABA is for treatment of multiple affected developmental domains, such as cognitive, communicative, social, emotional, and adaptive functioning. It ranges from 25 - 40 hours of treatment per week (plus direct and indirect supervision and caregiver training)<sup>16</sup> to increase the potential for behavior improvement. ABA may also be referred to as Early Intensive Behavior Intervention (EIBI) or Intensive Behavior Intervention (IBI).

## Policy/Criteria

- I. When ABA is a **covered benefit**, the *initiation of services* is considered **medically necessary** for members meeting all of the following criteria:
  - A. Diagnosis of ASD has been made and ABA recommended by a qualified licensed professional prior to request for services and confirmed by one of the following diagnosis specific tests/screening tools below. A qualified licensed professional is a person licensed as a physician, psychologist, social worker, clinical professional counselor, marriage and family therapist, addiction counselor, or another appropriate licensed health care practitioner working within their scope of practice and who are qualified to diagnose ASD and recommend ABA.
    1. Checklist for Autism in Toddlers (CHAT);
    2. Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers/Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers, Revised with follow-up (M-CHAT/M-CHAT-R/F);
    3. Screening Tool for Autism in Two-Year Olds (STAT);
    4. Social Communication Questionnaire (SCQ);
    5. Autism Spectrum Screening Questionnaire (ASSQ);
    6. Childhood Autism Spectrum Test, formerly known as the Childhood Asperger's Syndrome Test (CAST);
    7. Krug Asperger's Disorder Index (KADI);
    8. Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule/Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule - 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (ADOS/ADOS-2);
    9. Autism Diagnostic Interview Revised (ADI-R);
    10. Childhood Autism Rating Scale/ Childhood Autism Rating Scale -2<sup>nd</sup> edition (CARS/CARS-2);

11. Gilliam Autism Rating Scale (GARS);
  12. A valid form of approved evidence based assessment result/summary.
  - B.** A DSM-5 diagnosis, including severity level, validates ASD.
  - C.** The treatment plan is built upon individualized goals and projected time to achieve those goals with measurable objectives tailored to the member. Treatment is either focused or comprehensive based on the following guidelines:
    1. Focused ABA treatment meets both of the following:
      - a. Identifies hourly breakout for individual and group hours ranging from 10 - 25 hours per week including 1:1 direct, group, supervision, and caregiver training;
      - b. Identifies measureable outcomes for every goal and objective, including caregiver training.
    2. Comprehensive ABA treatment plan meets all of the following:
      - a. Identifies hourly breakout for individual and group hours ranging from 25 - 40 hours per week 1:1 direct, and group treatment.
      - b. Caregiver training is performance based;  
Identifies measureable outcomes for every goal and objective, including caregiver training.
  - D.** The treatment plan includes hours of therapy per day are that individualized with the goal of increasing or decreasing the intensity of therapy as the member's ability to tolerate and participate permits.
  - E.** The number of service hours necessary to effectively address the skill deficits and behavioral excesses is listed in the treatment plan and considers the member's age, school attendance requirements, and other daily activities when determining the number of hours of medically necessary direct service, group and supervision hours;
  - F.** The treatment plan includes an initial, individualized transition/discharge plan outlining desired outcomes for treatment goals;
  - G.** Roles and responsibilities of all providers, as well as effective dates for behavioral targets that must be achieved prior to the next phase of care, should be specified and coordinated with all providers, the member, and family members;
  - H.** Parent or caregiver training and support is incorporated into the treatment plan;
  - I.** Interventions are consistent with ABA techniques and align with the identified areas of need in the assessments.
- II.** The *continuation of ABA services* is considered **medically necessary** when all of the following criteria are met:
- A.** The member continues to meet criteria for ASD diagnosis;
  - B.** There is reasonable expectation that the member will benefit from the continuation of ABA therapy, as evidenced by mastery of skills defined in initial plan, or a change of treatment approach from the initial plan;
  - C.** Interventions are consistent with ABA techniques and align with the updated assessment;
  - D.** The treatment plan documents progress toward goals and is submitted for review every 3 - 6 months, or as state-mandated;
  - E.** The number of service hours are necessary to effectively address the member's skill deficits and behavior reduction goals is listed in the treatment plan and considers the member's age, school attendance requirements, and other daily activities when

determining the number of hours of medically necessary direct service, group and supervision hours;

- F. Roles and responsibilities of all providers, as well as effective dates for behavioral targets that must be achieved prior to the next phase, should be specified and coordinated with all providers, member, and family members;
- G. Treatment hours are subsequently increased or decreased based on response to treatment and current needs;
- H. Treatment is not making the symptoms worse;
- I. There is a reasonable expectation, based on the member's clinical history, that withdrawal of treatment will result in decompensation/loss of progress made, or recurrence of signs and symptoms.
- J. Assessments, evaluations, treatment plans, and documentation is expected to be current within each profession, licensure, and state standards.

### **Background**

A number of scientific studies have been conducted evaluating the effectiveness of ABA. The original and long-term follow-up study conducted by O. Ivar Lovaas included 38 children who were non-randomly assigned to ABA therapy or minimal therapy. Outcomes were compared to data from 21 children in another facility that had similar characteristics. Lovaas reported improvements in cognitive function and behavior that were sustained for at least 5 years. Almost half of the ABA group passed traditional first grade and had an IQ score that was at least average. The flaws in this study included: small sample size, non-randomization of patients to treatment groups, potential selection bias, and endpoints that may not meet current standards (Hayes Medical Directory). More recent studies have reported effectiveness in some autistic children, especially in relatively high-functioning children, but none have replicated the results from the Lovaas study.

Multiple systematic reviews with meta-analyses have been conducted on ABA studies for ASD, with conflicting results. Ospina and colleagues (2008) systematically reviewed studies comparing behavioral and developmental interventions for ASD. The four randomized control trials (RCTs) reviewed that compared ABA to Developmental Individual-difference relationship-based intervention (DIR) or Integrative/Discrete trial combined with Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH) found no significant difference in outcomes (Ospina et al., p. 4). Seven out of eight studies that reported significant improvements were not RCTs and have significant methodological limitations (Ospina et al., 2008, p. 5). Results from a meta-analysis of controlled clinical trials demonstrated that Lovaas is superior to special education for a variety of outcomes; however, there is no definitive evidence suggesting superiority of Lovaas over other active interventions (Ospina et al. 2008, p. 26). Additionally, five other systematic reviews found that ABA was an effective intervention for ASD, but still noted the substantial limitations of included studies, which could affect meta-analysis results and the expected efficacy of ABA (Eldevik 2009; Reichow 2009; Makrygianni 2010; Virues-Ortega 2010; Warren et al. 2011).

Furthermore, Reichow and others (2014) conducted a systematic review of the RCTs, quasi-RCTs, and controlled clinical trials in the ABA literature, commenting that these were not of optimal design. Reichow and others (2014) concluded that the evidence suggests ABA can lead

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to improvements in IQ, adaptive behavior, socialization, communication and daily living skills. However, they strongly caution that given the limited amount of reliable evidence, decisions about using ABA as an intervention for ASD should be made on a case by case basis (Reichow et al. 2014, p. 33). In contrast, Spreckley and Boyd (2009) state in their systematic review that children receiving high intensity ABA did not show significant improvement in cognitive functioning (IQ), receptive and expressive language, and adaptive behavior, compared to lesser interventions, including parenting training, parent-applied behavior intervention supervised weekly by a therapist, or interventions in kindergarten.

Further research needs to be done to determine the effectiveness of ABA at improving IQ, language skills, social skills, and adaptive behaviors, especially compared to other interventions. In addition, rigorous studies should examine which subgroups of children or adolescents with ASD benefit the most from ABA.

**Coding Implications**

This clinical policy references Current Procedural Terminology (CPT®). CPT® is a registered trademark of the American Medical Association. All CPT codes and descriptions are copyrighted 2019, American Medical Association. All rights reserved. CPT codes and CPT descriptions are from the current manuals and those included herein are not intended to be all-inclusive and are included for informational purposes only. Codes referenced in this clinical policy are for informational purposes only. Inclusion or exclusion of any codes does not guarantee coverage. Providers should reference the most up-to-date sources of professional coding guidance prior to the submission of claims for reimbursement of covered services.

CPT®* Codes	Description
97151	Behavior identification assessment, administered by a physician or other qualified health care professional, each 15 minutes of the physician's or other qualified health care professional's time face-to-face with patient and/or guardian(s)/caregiver(s) administering assessments and discussing findings and recommendations, and non-face-to-face analyzing past data, scoring/ interpreting the assessment, and preparing the report/treatment plan
97152	Behavior identification-supporting assessment, administered by one technician under the direction of a physician or other qualified health care professional, face-to-face with the patient, each 15 minutes
97153	Adaptive behavior treatment by protocol, administered by technician under the direction of a physician or other qualified health care professional, face-to-face with one patient, each 15 minutes
97154	Group adaptive behavior treatment by protocol, administered by technician under the direction of a physician or other qualified health care professional, face-to-face with two or more patients, each 15 minutes
97155	Adaptive behavior treatment with protocol modification, administered by physician or other qualified health care professional, which may include simultaneous direction of technician, face-to-face with one patient, each 15 minutes

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<b>CPT®*</b> <b>Codes</b>	<b>Description</b>
97156	Family adaptive behavior treatment guidance, administered by physician or other qualified health care professional (with or without the patient present), face-to-face with guardian(s)/caregiver(s), each 15 minutes
97157	Multiple-family group adaptive behavior treatment guidance, administered by physician or other qualified health care professional (without the patient present), face-to-face with multiple sets of guardians/caregivers, each 15 minutes
97158	Group adaptive behavior treatment with protocol modification, administered by physician or other qualified health care professional, face-to-face with multiple patients, each 15 minutes
0362T	Behavior identification supporting assessment, each 15 minutes of technicians' time face-to-face with a patient, requiring the following components: administration by the physician or other qualified health care professional who is on site; with the assistance of two or more technicians; for a patient who exhibits destructive behavior; completion in an environment that is customized to the patient's behavior.
0373T	Adaptive behavior treatment with protocol modification, each 15 minutes of technicians' time face-to-face with a patient, requiring the following components: administration by the physician or other qualified health care professional who is on site; with the assistance of two or more technicians; for a patient who exhibits destructive behavior; completion in an environment that is customized to the patient's behavior

**ICD-10-CM Diagnosis Codes that Support Coverage Criteria**

<b>ICD 10 CM Code</b>	<b>Description</b>
F84.0	Autistic disorder
F84.2	Rett's syndrome
F84.3	Other childhood disintegrative disorder
F84.5	Asperger's syndrome
F84.8	Other pervasive developmental disorders
F84.9	Pervasive developmental disorder, unspecified

<b>Reviews, Revisions, and Approvals</b>	<b>Revision Date</b>	<b>Approval Date</b>
Initial approval		08/09
Specified which DSM-IV and DSM-5 diagnoses apply, and broke these into separate criteria points. Added pediatric psychiatrist, neurologist, or developmental pediatrician as clinicians that can validate the ASD diagnosis.	05/18	05/18

Reviews, Revisions, and Approvals	Revision Date	Approval Date
<p>Updated description to include definition of focused and comprehensive ABA treatment. Moved providers qualified to make diagnosis of ASD to I. A. and added PCP to this group. Added updated versions of various screening/diagnostic tests noted in in I.B and #12, “ A valid form of approved evidenced based assessment result/summary” per recommendation of specialist. Removed requirement that neurological disorder, lead poisonings and primary speech or hearing disorder has been ruled out as this is implied. Added I.C., description of categories that justify ABA treatment; Added I.D treatment plan criteria for focused and comprehensive ABA.</p> <p>Under continuation of services, section II, removed requirement that treatment plan be reviewed on a monthly basis, revised review from 12 to 6 months in D &amp; E. Added additional criteria I.F-H. Removed statement that an appropriate diagnostician has ruled out intellectual disability or global developmental delay as a sole explanation for symptoms of ASD as this implied in I.A.</p> <p>References reviewed and updated. Specialist reviewed.</p>	01/19	02/19
<p>Removed examples of physician types under I.A and added “qualified licensed professional”. Removed four year old requirement from I.A.4. Removed section specifying which individual therapies ABA is not for the sole purpose of providing in I.H.</p>	03/19	
<p>Changed policy number to CP.BH.104. Replaced “Applied Behavioral Analysis” with “Applied Behavior Analysis.” Replaced “Lovaas therapy” with Early Intensive Behavior Intervention (EIBI). Updated Section I. A. to include “ABA recommended by a qualified licensed professional” and added definition of “qualified licensed professional.” Removed DSM-5 Criteria from Section I.B, as this was duplicative. Replaced “plan of care” with “treatment plan” in Section I.D. and added “the number of service hours necessary to effectively address the skill deficits and behavioral excesses is listed in the treatment plan and considers the member’s age, school attendance requirements, and other daily activities when determining the number of hours of medically necessary direct service, group and supervision hours” to Section I. E. Replaced “challenging behaviors” with “skill deficits and behavioral excesses” in Section II.E. Added “and align with the identified areas of need in the assessments” to Sections I.I. and II. C. Added “Assessments, evaluations, treatment plans, and documentation is expected to be current within each profession, licensure, and state standards.” to Section II. J.</p>	6/20	5/20
<p>Annual review. Reference list reviewed and updated. Changed “Review Date” in the header to “date of last revision” and “date” in the revision log header to “Revision date.”</p>	5/21	5/21

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#### **Important reminder**

This clinical policy has been developed by appropriately experienced and licensed health care professionals based on a review and consideration of currently available generally accepted standards of medical practice; peer-reviewed medical literature; government agency/program approval status; evidence-based guidelines and positions of leading national health professional organizations; views of physicians practicing in relevant clinical areas affected by this clinical policy; and other available clinical information. The Health Plan makes no representations and accepts no liability with respect to the content of any external information used or relied upon in developing this clinical policy. This clinical policy is consistent with standards of medical practice current at the time that this clinical policy was approved. “Health Plan” means a health plan that has adopted this clinical policy and that is operated or administered, in whole or in part, by Centene Management Company, LLC, or any of such health plan’s affiliates, as applicable.

The purpose of this clinical policy is to provide a guide to medical necessity, which is a component of the guidelines used to assist in making coverage decisions and administering benefits. It does not constitute a contract or guarantee regarding payment or results. Coverage decisions and the administration of benefits are subject to all terms, conditions, exclusions and limitations of the coverage documents (e.g., evidence of coverage, certificate of coverage, policy, contract of insurance, etc.), as well as to state and federal requirements and applicable Health Plan-level administrative policies and procedures.

This clinical policy is effective as of the date determined by the Health Plan. The date of posting may not be the effective date of this clinical policy. This clinical policy may be subject to applicable legal and regulatory requirements relating to provider notification. If there is a discrepancy between the effective date of this clinical policy and any applicable legal or regulatory requirement, the requirements of law and regulation shall govern. The Health Plan retains the right to change, amend or withdraw this clinical policy, and additional clinical policies may be developed and adopted as needed, at any time.

This clinical policy does not constitute medical advice, medical treatment or medical care. It is not intended to dictate to providers how to practice medicine. Providers are expected to exercise professional medical judgment in providing the most appropriate care, and are solely responsible for the medical advice and treatment of members. This clinical policy is not intended to recommend treatment for members. Members should consult with their treating physician in connection with diagnosis and treatment decisions.



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**Note: For Medicaid members,** when state Medicaid coverage provisions conflict with the coverage provisions in this clinical policy, state Medicaid coverage provisions take precedence. Please refer to the state Medicaid manual for any coverage provisions pertaining to this clinical policy.

**Note: For Medicare members,** to ensure consistency with the Medicare National Coverage Determinations (NCD) and Local Coverage Determinations (LCD), all applicable NCDs, LCDs, and Medicare Coverage Articles should be reviewed prior to applying the criteria set forth in this clinical policy. Refer to the CMS website at <http://www.cms.gov> for additional information.

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