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Evidence-Based ABA
Therapy Techniques

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Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is a scientifically validated approach to promoting behavior change and skill acquisition among individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). One of the surest ways of improving therapeutic effectiveness in practice is through implementing evidence-based techniques. In this e-book, we will focus on evidence-based ABA therapy techniques that have been proven to be effective, and we'll also touch on how to implement these techniques to foster the best outcomes.



Discrete Trial Training (DTT)

Discrete Trial Training is a teaching method used in ABA therapy that involves breaking down complex skills into smaller, more manageable components. These components are then taught in a highly structured environment that emphasizes repetition and positive reinforcement. DTT typically involves a sequence of steps that includes:

- **Antecedent:** A cue or other stimuli that prompts the start of a trial
- **Response:** The desired behavior or action
- **Consequence:** The immediate feedback given in response to the response, either positive or negative

DTT is typically used to teach specific skills such as communication, social interaction, self-help, and academic skills, among others.

Why is DDT Effective?

There are several reasons why DTT is so effective in ABA therapy:

- **Structured Environment:** DTT provides a highly structured environment that is predictable and organized. This structure helps learners feel more comfortable and in control, which can reduce stress and anxiety.
- **Reinforcement:** DTT emphasizes positive reinforcement, meaning that appropriate behaviors and responses are rewarded with positive feedback such as praise or a small token. This reinforcement motivates learners to continue to repeat the desired behaviors or actions.
- **Clear Expectations:** The steps involved in DTT are clear and explicit, so both the learner and the therapist understand what is expected. This clarity allows for a high level of consistency across teaching sessions, which can improve learning outcomes.
- **Individualized Instruction:** DTT can be individualized to meet the unique needs of each learner. This individualization allows for the development of personalized learning plans that can be adjusted as needed to help learners achieve their goals.



Tips for Effective DTT

While DTT is effective, there are several tips that can help make it even more effective in ABA therapy. These include:

- **Maximizing Motivation:** Find out what motivates the individual and use that motivation to encourage learning. For example, if the learner likes a specific toy or game, use that as a reward for appropriate behaviors.
- **Using Clear Feedback:** Provide clear and immediate feedback for responses. This feedback should be specific and focus on what was done well and areas for improvement.
- **Building in Generalization:** Make sure that learners are able to apply the skills they learn in DTT to real-life situations. This can involve gradually increasing the complexity of tasks and introducing new settings for practicing skills.



Natural Environment Training (NET)

Natural Environment Training, also known as incidental teaching or naturalistic teaching, is an approach within ABA therapy that aims to promote learning by creating opportunities for skill acquisition in the learner's natural environment. While traditional discrete trial training (DTT) is highly structured and takes place in a controlled setting, NET capitalizes on the individual's interests and incorporates teaching moments into their everyday routines and activities.

Advantages of Natural Environment Training

NET offers several advantages over traditional DTT:

- **Generalization of Skills:** One of the key benefits of NET is its ability to promote generalization of skills. By teaching skills in the natural environment, learners are more likely to apply those skills in real-life situations. This generalization allows for greater independence and success in a variety of contexts.
- **Increased Motivation:** NET leverages the individual's natural interests and preferences, making learning more engaging and exciting. By incorporating activities and materials that are meaningful to the learner, motivation is enhanced, leading to increased participation and willingness to learn.
- **Enhanced Social Interaction:** In a natural environment, learners have more opportunities for social interaction. NET facilitates meaningful social exchanges, encouraging individuals to practice social skills such as turn-taking, sharing, and initiating conversations. This social interaction not only promotes skill development but also fosters social connections and relationships.
- **Functional Skills:** NET focuses on teaching skills that are functionally relevant to the learner's life. By targeting skills that are practical and necessary for everyday living, individuals with ASD can acquire skills that they can directly apply in their daily routines, leading to increased independence and autonomy.



Strategies for Implementing Natural Environment Training

To effectively implement NET in ABA therapy, consider the following strategies:

- **Follow the Individual's Lead:** Observe and identify activities or interests that naturally engage the learner. Utilize these interests to create teaching opportunities that align with their motivations. By following the learner's lead, you can maximize their engagement and learning.
- **Embed Teaching Opportunities:** Identify natural teaching moments within the learner's routines and activities. For example, during mealtime, you could work on requesting objects or using utensils appropriately. By embedding teaching opportunities into daily activities, learning becomes seamless and relevant to the individual's life.
- **Use Prompting and Reinforcement:** Provide appropriate prompts to support the individual's learning, gradually reducing prompts as they become more proficient. Utilize positive reinforcement, such as praise, tokens, or access to preferred items, to reinforce correct responses and motivate continued learning.
- **Collaborate with Family and Caregivers:** Involve family members and caregivers in the implementation of NET. They can provide valuable insights into the learner's natural environment and contribute to the identification of teaching opportunities. Collaboration with family and caregivers ensures consistency and generalization of skills across different settings.

Pivotal Response Training (PRT)

Pivotal Response Training (PRT) is a naturalistic approach to ABA therapy that emphasizes child-centered, play-based, and motivational teaching methods. PRT focuses on targeting the pivotal or foundational skills that have a cascading effect on the development of other skills. These pivotal skills include motivation, response to multiple cues, self-management, and social communication. By targeting these pivotal skills, individuals with ASD can experience significant improvements in multiple areas of functioning.



What are the Pivotal Skills?

The four pivotal skills that PRT targets are:

- **Motivation:** Motivation is the driving force behind learning. PRT emphasizes finding activities that motivate the child and using those activities to promote learning. By fostering motivation, children become more invested in their learning and are more likely to participate in activities that will help them acquire new skills.
- **Response to Multiple Cues:** Individuals with ASD often have difficulties responding to multiple stimuli. PRT targets this pivotal skill by teaching children to respond to different cues and stimuli. By doing so, they develop flexibility and become better able to adapt to the complexities of the real world.
- **Self-Management:** Self-management is the ability to regulate one's behavior and emotions. PRT focuses on teaching children to independently self-monitor, self-correct, and regulate their own behaviors, leading to greater independence and autonomy.
- **Social Communication:** Social communication is an essential skill for individuals with ASD. PRT targets social communication by teaching skills such as initiating conversations, taking turns, and understanding emotions. By improving social communication skills, individuals with ASD can better navigate social situations and establish relationships.

How Does PRT Work?

PRT is a highly individualized approach to ABA therapy that is tailored to the specific needs and interests of each child. PRT sessions are typically play-based and involve the child's preferred activities and toys. The therapist strategically incorporates teaching moments into the child's play, utilizing techniques such as turn-taking, reinforcement, and choice-making.

PRT emphasizes natural reinforcement, meaning that rewards are associated with the child's own behavior. For example, if a child initiates a conversation independently, the therapist might acknowledge the child's success and provide praise, reinforcement, or access to a preferred item. By associating these natural reinforcers with desirable behaviors, children become more receptive to learning and motivated to continue practicing the targeted skills.



Benefits of PRT

PRT has several benefits, including:

- **Naturalistic Approach:** PRT takes a naturalistic approach to ABA therapy, meaning that it focuses on teaching skills in the context of the child's natural environment. By doing so, skills become more generalizable and can be easily transferred to real-life situations.
- **Child-Centered:** PRT is a child-centered approach, meaning that it utilizes the child's interests, preferences, and abilities to guide the therapy session. By incorporating activities that the child enjoys, motivation and engagement are enhanced, leading to greater success in learning.
- **Broad-reaching Improvements:** PRT targets pivotal skills that have a cascading effect on other areas of functioning. By improving these pivotal skills, individuals with ASD can experience broad-reaching improvements in multiple areas, including social communication, self-management, and adaptive behavior.

Task Analysis

Task analysis is defined as the process of identifying and breaking down a complex activity or skill into smaller, more manageable steps or components. While it sounds similar to discrete trial training (DTT), they differ. Task analysis is the process of breaking down complex skills into smaller steps, while DTT is a teaching method that uses discrete trials to teach individual components of a skill. In ABA therapy, task analysis is used to teach individuals with ASD a wide range of skills, from simple activities of daily living to more complex academic or social behaviors.

How is Task Analysis Implemented?

The implementation of task analysis in ABA therapy involves several stages:

- **Identifying the target skill:** The first step is to identify the specific skill that the individual needs to learn. It is important to define the skill clearly, considering the learner's age, abilities, and current level of functioning.
- **Breaking down the skill:** Once the target skill is identified, the therapist breaks it down into smaller, sequential steps. For example, if the skill is brushing teeth, the steps may include holding the toothbrush, squeezing toothpaste, brushing the front teeth, brushing the back teeth, and rinsing.
- **Determining the order of steps:** The therapist determines the order in which the steps should be taught. It is crucial to consider the learner's current abilities and any prerequisites for each step. For instance, before teaching toothbrushing, the learner should have mastered holding the toothbrush.

- **Creating visual supports:** Visual supports, such as task analysis charts or visual schedules, are often utilized to enhance learning. These visuals provide a clear visual representation of the steps involved in completing the task.
- **Teaching the steps:** The therapist teaches the individual each step of the task, starting with the first step. The steps are often taught using a combination of verbal instructions, modeling, physical prompts, and positive reinforcement.



- **Promoting independence:** As the learner progresses, the therapist gradually reduces the level of assistance provided and encourages independent completion of the task. This is done through a process called fading, where prompts are gradually faded out until the individual can complete the task independently.

Why is Task Analysis Important?

Task analysis is a fundamental aspect of ABA therapy for several reasons:

- **Builds success and confidence:** Breaking down tasks into smaller steps allows learners to experience success and build confidence. Each mastered step provides a sense of accomplishment and motivates the learner to continue learning.
- **Enhances understanding:** Individuals with ASD often struggle with processing and sequencing information. Task analysis provides a structured method of learning by presenting information in a step-by-step format, making it easier for learners to understand and remember.
- **Facilitates generalization:** By breaking down tasks, individuals with ASD can generalize the learned skills to various settings and situations. Breaking down tasks helps them grasp the underlying concepts and apply them in different contexts.
- **Allows for individualized instruction:** Task analysis allows therapists to tailor instruction to the learner's specific needs and abilities. It enables therapists to adjust the difficulty level of each step and customize prompts accordingly.
- **Tracks progress:** Task analysis provides a clear framework for tracking progress. Therapists can easily identify and target specific steps that require additional practice or mastery.

Social Stories

Social stories were first introduced by Carol Gray in 1991 as a method to support individuals with ASD in navigating social interactions and understanding social rules. A social story is a simple yet effective tool that uses storytelling to explain social situations, address challenging behaviors, and teach appropriate social skills. These stories aim to provide individuals with ASD with a clear and predictable framework to interpret and respond to social cues.

How are Social Stories Implemented in ABA Therapy?

Implementing social stories in ABA therapy involves several key steps:

- **Identifying the target skill:** The first step is to identify the specific social skill that the individual needs to develop or understand. It could be anything from taking turns, making eye contact, or engaging in conversations.
- **Writing the social story:** The therapist or caregiver writes a social story that is tailored to the individual's needs and abilities. The story should be written in a positive and non-judgmental tone, providing clear and concise explanations of the social situation and expected behaviors.
- **Using visual supports:** Visual supports, such as pictures or drawings, are often added to the social story to enhance comprehension and engagement. The visual supports help the learner better understand the story and reinforce the key messages being conveyed.
- **Reinforcing positive behaviors:** The social story is read and reviewed with the learner consistently, using repetition to reinforce the desired social behaviors. Positive reinforcement, such as praise or rewards, can be incorporated to motivate and encourage the learner.
- **Generalizing the skills:** The goal of social stories is to generalize the learned social skills beyond the context of the story. The therapist helps the learner practice and apply the skills in real-life situations to promote generalization.



Benefits of Social Stories

Social stories have several benefits when used in ABA therapy:

- **Promote understanding:** Individuals with ASD often struggle with understanding and interpreting social situations and expectations. Social stories provide clear explanations and examples that help learners with ASD better comprehend social cues and appropriate behaviors.
- **Teach new skills:** Social stories are an effective teaching tool for introducing and practicing new social skills. They break down complex social situations into manageable steps, making it easier to grasp.
- **Reduce anxiety:** Social stories can help reduce anxiety by providing learners with a predictable framework for navigating social situations. By understanding what to expect, they can feel more prepared and less anxious.
- **Increase independence:** Social stories empower learners to independently navigate social interactions. By understanding social norms and expectations, they can make more informed choices and engage in appropriate behaviors without constant prompting or guidance.
- **Enhance peer interactions:** Social stories can improve social interactions by helping individuals with ASD better understand the perspective of others and use empathy. This understanding promotes positive social connections and reduces social isolation.

Video Modeling

Video modeling is a teaching technique that uses video recordings to demonstrate and teach various behaviors, skills, and activities. The videos are typically filmed in a controlled setting, showcasing a model or peer engaging in the behavior or activity that the learner needs to learn. By watching the video, learners with ASD can observe and imitate the behavior, increasing their chances of learning and mastering the skill.

How is Video Modeling Implemented?

Implementing video modeling in ABA therapy involves several key steps:

- **Identifying the target behavior:** The first step is to identify the specific behavior that the learner needs to learn or improve. This could be anything from playing with toys to engaging in conversation.
- **Creating the video:** The therapist or caregiver creates a video recording that features a model or peer engaging in the target behavior. The video recording is typically structured, with specific steps or components of the behavior highlighted.

- **Reinforcing positive behaviors:** The video is shown to the learner repeatedly, with positive reinforcement, such as praise or rewards, provided for imitating the target behavior successfully.
- **Generalizing the behavior:** The goal of video modeling is to generalize the learned behavior beyond the context of the video. The therapist helps the learner practice and apply the behavior in real-life situations to promote generalization.



Benefits of Video Modeling

Video modeling has several benefits when used in ABA therapy:

- **Facilitates learning:** For individuals with ASD, learning new skills can be challenging. Video modeling provides a visual example that makes it easier for them to understand the steps involved in a particular behavior or activity.
- **Strengthens imitation skills:** Imitation skills are essential for social interaction and learning. Video modeling provides learners with an opportunity to practice and strengthen their imitation skills.
- **Promotes independence:** Video modeling encourages independence by reducing the amount of prompting and guidance required for learning. Learners can watch the video and practice the behavior independently.
- **Enhances generalization:** Video modeling can improve generalization by exposing learners to various examples of the target behavior. This exposure enables them to apply the behavior in different contexts and situations.
- **Provides flexibility:** Video modeling can be used to teach a wide range of behaviors and activities, making it a flexible and versatile tool in ABA therapy.

Functional Communication Training (FCT)

Functional support training is a method in ABA therapy that teaches individuals with ASD functional skills that promote greater independence. These skills might include domestic tasks, self-care, communication, and leisure activities. Functional support training aims to teach learners skills that they can apply in their daily lives, making meaningful contributions to their communities and living more independently.

How is Functional Support Training Implemented in ABA Therapy?

Implementing functional support training in ABA therapy involves several key steps:

- **Identifying individual needs:** The therapist assesses the individual's specific needs and identifies the functional skills that they need to learn or develop.
- **Defining the steps to achieve goals:** The therapist works with the individual to define specific steps towards achieving their goals. This step-by-step approach helps ensure that the individual understands the specific steps needed to learn and apply the skill.
- **Setting achievable goals:** Goals are set based on the individual's abilities, interests, and preferences. These goals are designed to be challenging yet achievable, to provide a sense of accomplishment on completion.
- **Incorporating positive reinforcement:** Positive reinforcement, such as praise or rewards, is used to motivate and reinforce successful behavior. Reinforcement is essential in facilitating the learning process and build positive connections between the learner and instructor.
- **Generalizing the skills:** The ultimate goal of functional support training is to facilitate generalization. The therapist encourages the learner to practice the skill in different settings to develop their independence and become self-confident.

Benefits of Functional Support Training

Functional support training has several benefits when used in ABA therapy:

- **Facilitates greater independence:** Functional support training is a crucial element in teaching individuals with ASD the skills they need to live independently. These skills enable individuals to actively participate in their communities and daily routine.
- **Strengthens self-esteem:** Individuals with ASD can struggle with self-esteem, particularly when challenged with personal tasks like self-care or household maintenance. Functional support training targets these tasks to harness increased self-confidence and self-care abilities.
- **Increases flexibility and adaptability:** Functional support training aims to teach learners flexible thinking and adaptability. This approach enables them to develop strategies for coping with unanticipated situations, building their ability to manage unanticipated new scenarios.

- **Strengthens social connections:** Using functional support training strengthens social connections while learning to engage in shared activities with family and community. These activities, such as meal preparation or household chores, build relationships and increase mental stimulation.
- **Teaches essential life skills:** Functional support training teaches learners essential life skills (like cooking, budgeting, and cleaning), enabling them to be self-sufficient and participate fully in their communities



Self-Management

Self-management is a behavioral approach that teaches learners to take control of their own behavior. This approach teaches individuals how to identify and monitor their own behavior, evaluate their success in achieving their goals, and adjust their behavior to meet their objectives. The goal of self-management in ABA therapy is to increase individuals' independence, self-awareness, and self-confidence.

How is Self-Management Implemented?

Implementing self-management in ABA therapy involves several key steps:

- **Goal Setting:** The therapist and learner work together to identify specific, measurable, and attainable goals. These goals can be related to social skills, academics, or life skills, such as hygiene or household management.

- **Self-Monitoring:** Learners are taught how to track their progress and record their behavior through various methods such as checklists or diaries. This self-monitoring process allows learners to reflect on their progress and identify areas of improvement.
- **Self-Evaluation:** Learners use the data collected to evaluate their behavior and progress towards their goals. This evaluation reinforces positive behaviors, corrects negative behavior through proactive approaches, and develops critical problem-solving skills.
- **Self-Reinforcement:** Individuals learn how to provide positive reinforcement to themselves or self-feedback through assessing their own progress. This self-reinforcement is intended to encourage and motivate positive behavior, build self-esteem, and reinforce problem-solving skills.
- **Generalization:** Individuals learn and apply self-management beyond ABA sessions to develop life skills applicable to various social settings.

Why is Self-Management Important in ABA Therapy?

Self-management has several important benefits when used in ABA therapy:

- **Increased Independence:** Self-management fosters independence by encouraging learners to take control of their own behavior and foster decision-making processes as they learn to make informed decisions about their treatment, behavior, and life goals.
- **Improved Self-Awareness:** Self-management increases self-awareness as individuals learn how to identify and monitor their own behaviors. This increased self-awareness leads to enhanced self-reflection, problem-solving skills, and confidence.
- **Encourages critical thinking and Problem-Solving:** Self-management encourages critical thinking and problem-solving skills as learners understand the behaviors that influence decision-making processes.
- **Promotes Generalization:** Through the self-management process, individuals can generalize their learned skills self-control and self-regulation. This support ensures proper behavior aimed towards routines, tasks and decision-making processes for daily routines.
- **Facilitates Goal Achievement:** Self-management encourages goal achievement and positively reinforces decision-making through successful goal completion, increasing self-value and confidence.

Visual Supports

Visual supports are tools or aids that use visual information to communicate and support individuals with ASD. These supports can take various forms, such as:

- **Visual schedules:** Timetables or schedules that use pictures or symbols to represent tasks or activities, helping learners understand and follow routines.
- **Visual cues:** Visual prompts, such as pictures or gestures, that provide information or guidance for desired behaviors or tasks.
- **Choice boards:** Visual displays that present options to learners, allowing them to make choices and express preferences.
- **Social stories:** Visual narratives that describe social situations, helping learners understand and navigate social interactions.
- **Visual timers:** Timers that use visual cues, such as colored lights or falling sand, to indicate the passage of time and aid in transitioning between activities.

Visual supports can be customized to meet the unique needs and preferences of each learner. They provide a tangible and concrete way to convey information and facilitate understanding.



How are Visual Supports Implemented?

Visual supports are carefully selected and incorporated into ABA therapy based on the specific needs of each individual. Here's how visual supports are typically implemented:

- **Assessment:** ABA therapists assess the learner's strengths, challenges, and communication abilities to determine which visual supports are most suitable.
- **Individualization:** Visual supports are customized and tailored to the learner's specific needs, ensuring they are meaningful and relevant.
- **Introduction and Teaching:** ABA therapists introduce the visual supports and teach learners how to use them effectively. This may involve modeling, prompting, and gradually fading assistance as the individual becomes more independent.
- **Consistency and Reinforcement:** Visual supports are consistently used across various settings and situations to promote generalization and consistency. Reinforcement, such as praise or rewards, may be provided when learners use the visual supports correctly.
- **Maintenance and Generalization:** ABA therapists and caregivers work together to ensure that learners continue to use visual supports even outside of therapy sessions. Generalization is encouraged by using the supports across different environments, such as home, school, and community settings.

Why are Visual Supports Important in ABA Therapy?

Visual supports play a crucial role in ABA therapy for individuals with ASD. Here are some key reasons why visual supports are important:

- **Enhanced Communication:** Visual supports provide a visual representation of information, making it easier for learners to understand and communicate their needs, preferences, and challenges.
- **Promote Independence:** Visual supports empower learners by giving them the tools to understand and navigate their environment independently. By using visual cues and schedules, learners can follow routines, complete tasks, and make choices with increased autonomy.
- **Reduce Anxiety and Promote Predictability:** For individuals with ASD, the world can be overwhelming and unpredictable. Visual supports offer a structured and predictable framework, reducing anxiety and promoting a sense of security.
- **Support Learning and Skill Acquisition:** Visual supports aid in teaching new skills and behaviors by breaking them down into manageable steps and providing clear instructions. This visual structure promotes understanding and learning.
- **Facilitate Generalization:** Visual supports can be used across different settings and situations, helping learners generalize their skills and knowledge beyond the therapy sessions.

Conclusion

As an ABA provider, it is crucial to seek effective and evidence-based techniques to enhance your practice and provide your clients with meaningful progress. Implementing the techniques outlined in this e-book provides the foundation for positive outcomes in skill acquisition. The most effective evidence-based techniques are those that involve the learner, building a supportive environment that promotes independence and self-regulation. Incorporating ABA therapy software like **Catalyst** creates a platform that streamlines the implementation of evidence-based techniques while saving on time used on data analysis and reporting, allowing BCBA's to provide more focused and efficient care.

Catalyst

Catalyst is a powerful data collection software that is designed specifically for Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) providers to help enforce ABA therapy techniques. With Catalyst, ABA providers can easily track progress and monitor the effectiveness of therapy interventions in real time using customizable data collection tools. The software enables providers to quickly and accurately score target behaviors, identify trends, and generate data-driven reports to demonstrate progress. Catalyst's advanced features, such as automatic prompting, goal setting, and task analysis, help ensure that therapy interventions are tailored to each individual's unique needs, resulting in more effective outcomes. Additionally, Catalyst allows for collaboration among providers, parents, and caregivers, enabling open communication and continuous improvement of therapy interventions. By streamlining data collection and analysis, Catalyst helps ABA providers enforce evidence-based therapy techniques and improve their quality of care. To learn more about Catalyst, [schedule a free personalized demo today](#).

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