

Is Applied Behavior Analysis Abusive?

To answer directly, no.

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) plays a significant role in helping individuals with developmental disabilities. However, as with any field, ethical concerns arise when interventions are applied without continuous reflection and adaptation. Over the past decade, adults who received ABA services as children have been increasingly vocal about their experiences, with many expressing feelings of being misunderstood or controlled (Hess, 2021) and likening their treatment to abuse. This has even become a trending topic on social media platforms such as TikTok, where discussions about ABA have gathered millions of views, threatening to cast a negative light on the field and to deprive those who need intensive treatment from receiving life changing services due to these misunderstandings.



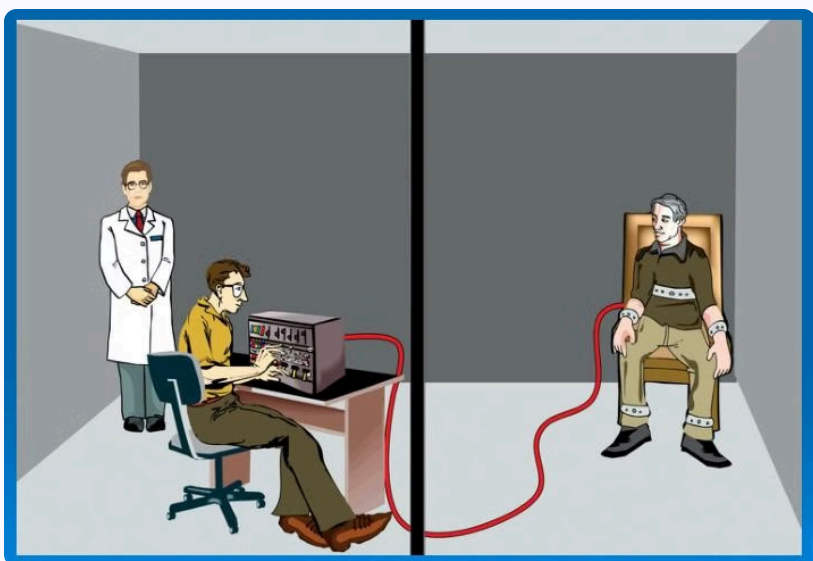
ABA's foundation is grounded in positive reinforcement and behavior modification, but like any therapeutic approach, its success depends on how it's applied. Feedback from individuals receiving ABA services, particularly those who later felt harmed by their experiences, shows us that rigid adherence to protocols without understanding the client's perspective can lead to negative outcomes.

How can Abuse Happen?

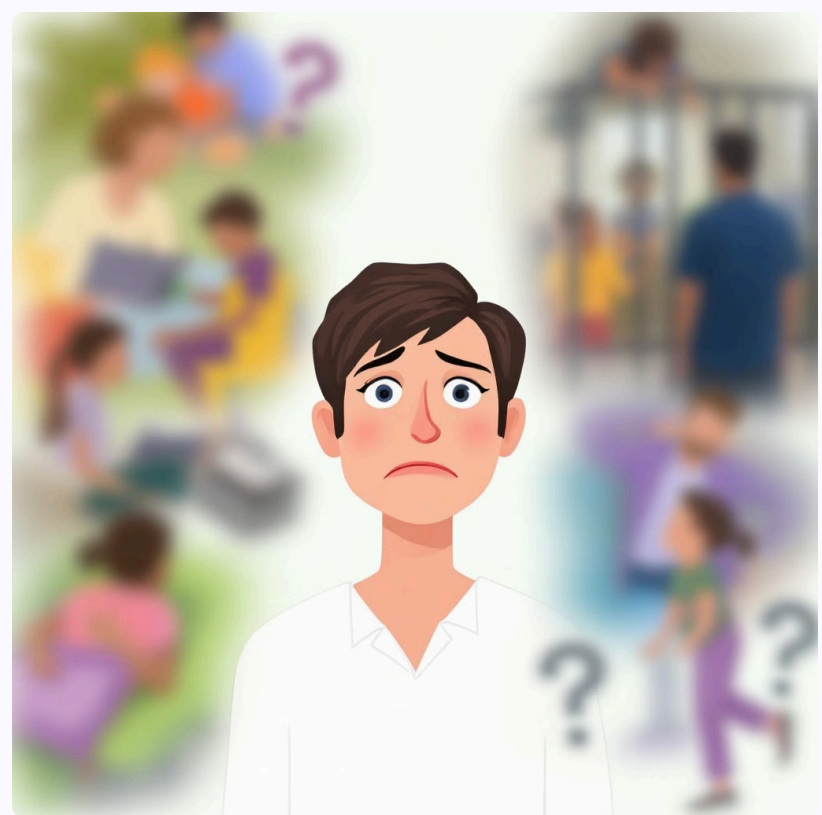
One of the most significant risks in ABA is failing to recognize the client's emotional experience during therapy sessions. Studies from 2016 to 2020 have shown that 25% of ABA practitioners reported unknowingly engaging in ethically questionable practices due to outdated training or unclear guidance (Taylor et al., 2020). This often happens when practitioners feel pressured to adhere strictly to intervention plans without considering individual needs or when challenging behaviors arise unexpectedly.

Ignoring Visible Distress & Following Absolutes

An infamous example of how adherence to rules can lead to unintended harm is the **Milgram experiment** (Milgram, 1963). Participants in this experiment were instructed to follow orders to administer shocks, even when they knew it was causing pain due to vague instructions from a person of authority. In a similar vein, ABA practitioners sometimes follow strict guidelines, not realizing that their actions might cause distress to clients if emotional well-being is overlooked.



Providing Incomplete descriptions



Another historical case in ABA, the **Sunland Miami scandal** of 1972, where two seemingly innocent instructions lead to inhumane practices and atrocities. Those two primary core instructions "to be consistent and to "follow through" with any consequences or actions they said they would implement" and to obtain compliance through ensuring that the actual challenging behavior's intervention was also included in the response. Otherwise known as overcorrection, which is still being used today in ABA (Risley, 1977). To the average instructor, these instructions would not have been seen as anything particularly negative or alarming. However, without specific descriptive scientific instruction, anything can be left to interpretation. In the case of the residents in the Sunland hospital this led to severe mistreatment of the residents.

The ABA Code of Ethics stresses the importance of clear and systematic guidance: “Behavior analysts describe behavior-change procedures and interventions in terms that are conceptually systematic and clear for others to implement correctly” (BACB, 2020). The Sunland incident underscores how essential it is for instructions to be explicitly detailed, ensuring that even new practitioners can implement interventions safely, without unintended consequences.

High-Risk Ethical Areas in ABA

1

Over-reliance on Compliance

Adults who received ABA as children often report feeling "trained" rather than supported, especially when interventions prioritized compliance over fostering communication and autonomy (Hess, 2021).

Applying the golden rule with inward reflection would quickly show that there are some times where compliance should be declined. Practitioners should aim to balance behavior modification with ensuring the client's voice is heard and respected.

2

Lack of Ongoing Assessment

Research shows that intervention plans can lose effectiveness if not reassessed regularly (Samuels & Newman, 2021).

This can be due to procedural drift where the instruction can be forgotten, become sloppy or just become irrelevant. It is important to remain adaptable and current, using the client's feedback whenever possible to adjust strategies rather than assuming one approach will remain effective indefinitely.

3

Punishment-Based Strategies

The use of punishment, such as physical restraint or verbal corrections, can lead to significant emotional harm. A punishment procedure should never be the first or second course of behavior intervention, rather all possible positive behavior support methods should be implemented and documented to have failed prior to utilizing a punishment procedure. This depends of course on the severity of the challenging behavior being demonstrated, however if punishment is absolutely deemed necessary, it's critical to prioritize positive reinforcement and adapt interventions if clients show signs of distress or struggle to comply.

How Can We See Change?



Over the past few years, adults with autism who received ABA during childhood have increasingly shared their stories, many of which revolve around feeling disrespected or treated as if their emotions were irrelevant (Hess, 2021). This feedback challenges all ABA practitioners to reflect on their own practices and ask themselves if they are truly respecting the autonomy and dignity of their clients.

Regardless of your current practice level, there's always more to learn. Ethical practice is not static—every day brings new challenges, perspectives, and scenarios that we may not have previously considered. The stories shared on platforms remind us that while ABA should be a supportive and effective intervention, without proper oversight and reflection, it can unintentionally become harmful. It's essential to continually seek feedback, consult with peers, and engage in ongoing training to ensure you're delivering the highest standard of care.

Could My Practices Be Abusive Quiz

Take our competency quiz, which is designed to raise awareness of ethical boundaries, encourage self-reflection, and reinforce best practices in Applied Behavior Analysis. Recognizing potential risks early on is essential to ensuring respectful, effective, and compassionate interventions for clients. Could My Practices Be Abusive Quiz

1. When responding to challenging behavior during a session, which of the following best describes your approach?
 - A) I usually ignore the behavior until the session ends.
 - B) I often increase the intensity of the intervention without reassessing its effectiveness.
 - C) I escalate punishment-based interventions to ensure compliance.
 - D) I take time to pause, reassess the behavior, and adjust the intervention accordingly.
2. Reflecting on the past year, have you ever withheld food or basic needs as a consequence for non-compliance during a session?
 - A) No
 - B) Yes
3. Consider the following actions. Which of these, if any, have you applied during a session? (Check all that apply)
 - I have used physical restraint without immediate danger to the student or others.
 - I have raised my voice or yelled out of frustration.
 - I have continued to force compliance from a student showing clear signs of distress.
 - I primarily use reinforcement-based strategies to encourage positive behaviors.
4. How often do you review and modify interventions to ensure they remain appropriate and effective for the student?
 - A) I generally do not modify interventions once implemented.
 - B) I modify interventions when they stop working entirely.
 - C) I only review interventions when the funding source requests updates.
 - D) I regularly modify interventions based on the student's progress and data.
5. Have you ever continued using an intervention even when data shows it to be ineffective, simply because the funding source approved it?

A) No

B) Yes

6. During a session, you become frustrated with a student and yell at them, saying, "You know better!" You also threaten to remove their earned rewards unless they comply. How would you handle this situation in the future?

A) Continue using these tactics to ensure compliance.

B) Ignore the behavior unless it escalates into something more serious.

C) Reassess your emotional reactions and avoid using any threats or negative language in the future.

D) Avoid yelling but continue threatening to take away rewards when the student is not following instructions.

7. Reflecting on your practice, which of these actions have you taken when billing a funding source? (Check all that apply)

I have billed for services not rendered.

I have provided interventions unrelated to the student's treatment plan.

I have exaggerated service hours to meet funding requirements.

I consistently document services and interventions provided in each session.

8. When a parent or guardian has expressed concern about an intervention, how have you typically responded?

A) I usually dismiss their concerns and continue the intervention.

B) I discuss their concerns and consider revisions to the intervention plan.

C) I refer them to another staff member for clarification.

D) I ask them to observe the session but avoid changing anything.

9. Reflecting on your approach, if a student shows improvement in behavior, do you continue billing for the original level of services, even if fewer hours are now required?

A) Yes

B) No

10. When an intervention consistently causes distress to the student over multiple sessions, what is your typical response?

- A) Modify the strategy to reduce distress while still targeting behavior goals.
- B) Ignore the distress as long as the behavior is improving.
- C) Continue with the same strategy, assuming the student will eventually adjust.
- D) Use aversive techniques to accelerate compliance.

11. Think about the dynamics that you notice during your sessions. Which of these could be expected during your session? (Check all that apply)

- The student frequently cries, withdraws, or screams during sessions.
- My intervention relies heavily on punishment with little reinforcement.
- The student shows physical harm or discomfort due to the intervention.
- The student is making progress and seems engaged during the sessions.

12. Reflecting on your documentation, have you ever modified data to show better outcomes in order to secure continued funding for a student's services?

- A) Yes
- B) No

13. Have you ever struck, pinched, or used any form of physical harm toward a student to gain compliance?

- A) No
- B) Yes

14. In what situations, if any, do you physically restrain a student?

- A) Only when the student poses an immediate danger to themselves or others.
- B) When the student is being non-compliant and it helps regain control of the session.
- C) To prevent the student from leaving the session area.
- D) I regularly use restraint as part of my behavior management strategies.

15. In order to establish rapport with the client and family, I have:

- Shared my personal phone number with a student and regularly exchanged personal texts outside of session hours.
- Accepted gifts or money from a student or their family that go beyond customary or small tokens of appreciation.
- Engaged in flirtatious behavior with a student or their family or made comments about body parts in jest.
- Discussed my own financial difficulties during sessions.

Disclaimer

This is a short competency quiz intended to help identify if current practices are potentially abusive. Although it is meant to serve as a useful tool, it should not be considered legally binding or complete in determining ethical truths or as grounds for accusations against any individual. It is always best practice to first reach out directly to the person with whom you have concerns before taking further steps. For additional guidance, please contact your agency's HR department, the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB), ABAethicsHotline.com, or reach out to Jon Bailey, co-author of the *Ethics for Behavior Analysts* textbook, at abaethicshotline@gmail.com.

Answer Key

Each correct answer is worth 1 point. On question 15, if none are selected assign 1 point; subtract 0.5 points for each incorrect selection made.

1. D - 1 point
2. A - 1 point
3. Only I primarily use reinforcement-based strategies to encourage positive behaviors.
 - 1 point for selecting only this option; subtract 0.5 points for each additional, incorrect option selected
4. D - 1 point
5. A - 1 point
6. C - 1 point
7. Only I consistently document services and interventions provided in each session.
 - 1 point for selecting only this option; subtract 0.5 points for each additional, incorrect option selected
8. B - 1 point
9. B - 1 point
10. A - 1 point
11. Only The student is making progress and seems engaged during the sessions.
 - 1 point for selecting only this option; subtract 0.5 points for each additional, incorrect option selected
12. B - 1 point
13. A - 1 point
14. A - 1 point
15. No selections are correct.

Quiz Results and Interpretation

0-4 points: Immediate Action Required

Your current intervention strategies may be placing your clients at risk of harm, and immediate action is required to prevent further issues. We know that facing these challenges can be daunting, but you're not alone. Recognizing the need for improvement is an important first step, and with the right support, you can turn things around. Addressing these concerns now is crucial for both your clients and your professional future. Taking corrective action shows your commitment to growth and your willingness to prioritize ethical practice.

5-8 points: Risk for Harmful Practices

Your responses suggest that some of your intervention strategies may unintentionally place clients at risk. This can happen to the best of us, especially when working in a demanding field like ABA. It's important to take a step back and recognize that making improvements now will benefit both you and the students you support. Acknowledging these risks is the first step toward becoming a more effective and ethical practitioner.

9-12 points: Needs Attention

While your practices are largely aligned with ethical standards, there are a few areas that may need improvement. You're doing well overall, but your responses indicate that there are a few areas where your strategies may need some refinement. It's understandable that balancing ethical practice with the challenges of day-to-day work can be difficult, and it's commendable that you've made progress in this area. However, even the most experienced professionals can benefit from revisiting key ethical principles to ensure that their interventions are as safe and effective as possible. It's important to regularly review your interventions and ensure that you're not unintentionally causing harm to students or mismanaging funding.

13-15 points: Safe and Ethical Practices

Your responses suggest that your intervention strategies are aligned with best practices, and you demonstrate a strong commitment to maintaining safe, non-abusive, and ethical services. You have a clear understanding of maintaining professional boundaries, ensuring client safety, and adhering to ethical principles. Even so, it is essential to remember that ethical standards and procedural guidelines are continually evolving. Even with a strong foundation, staying current with updates in both ethics and procedural practices is crucial. Regularly reviewing the BACB's Professional and Ethical Compliance Code and participating in ongoing professional development can help you stay informed about new standards and changes that may impact your practice.



Sign Up to Learn More

As you continue your journey in ABA, staying current with ethical practices is vital. We encourage you to sign up for notifications on our upcoming courses, which focuses on recognizing and avoiding the subtle pitfalls that can arise in practice. This course will provide real-world scenarios and in-depth guidance on maintaining ethical integrity in all client interactions. Just shoot us an email at contact@theappliedbehavioracademy.com to join the waitlist or visit TheAppliedBehaviorAcademy.com and sign up today!

Resources

Taylor, B. A., LeBlanc, L. A., & Nosik, M. R. (2020). Compassionate care in behavior analytic treatment: Can we balance our commitment to outcomes with care and empathy? *Behavior Analysis in Practice*, 13(1), 1-9.

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