

ABA Tactics

The tactics one by one — compliance training, extinction, quiet hands, forced eye contact — and what each one actually does.

Reach for it when a programme is being described in technical language and you need to know what the words mean in a child's day.

Content note. Discusses trauma, abuse, coercion, and suicide.

A companion to our [Behaviorism why sheet](https://stimpunks.org/why/behaviorism/) (<https://stimpunks.org/why/behaviorism/>) and our [Behaviorism glossary entry](https://stimpunks.org/glossary/behaviorism/) (<https://stimpunks.org/glossary/behaviorism/>).

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Why the Tactics of ABA Are Harmful

Applied Behavior Analysis is sold as a collection of neutral, evidence-based "techniques." It isn't. Every tactic in ABA descends from the same premise: that an Autistic child is a set of behaviors to be increased or decreased, and that the people around them are the ones who get to decide which. The tactics are the premise made operational.

You don't have to relitigate that premise every time someone asks you to defend your own childhood. This sheet names the tactics one by one, says plainly what each one is, and says plainly why it harms. Hand it over. Stop explaining.

If you went through ABA and recognize yourself in this list, we believe you.

The logic underneath every tactic

Before the tactics, the worldview that produces them.

Behaviorism is a theory of learning that attends only to observable, measurable behavior. It does not account for thoughts, sensory experience, pain, anxiety, trauma, or emotion, because those things can't be counted ([NeuroClastic](https://neuroclastic.com/2021/04/08/what-is-aba-and-does-it-work/) (<https://neuroclastic.com/2021/04/08/what-is-aba-and-does-it-work/>)). The more attention is fixed on the surface, the more a child's underlying motives, values, and needs are slighted ([Alfie Kohn](https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/behavior/) (<https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/behavior/>)).

ABA formalizes this through the "functions of behavior" — the claim that any behavior exists to get attention, escape a demand, access something tangible, or for automatic/sensory reasons. A stress response, a pain signal, a moment of overwhelm, a communication attempt — all of it gets sorted into those four boxes and managed accordingly. The interior life of the child is treated as noise.

Behaviorism is a repudiation, an almost willful dismissal, of subjective experience.

— Alfie Kohn (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MJbqkzDTdg&t=613s>)

That dismissal is not a side effect of the tactics. It is the design. Keep it in mind as you read down the list.

The tactics, one by one

Compliance training (instructional control)

What it is: Establishing the adult as the authority whose instructions the child reliably follows — often the *first* goal of a program, before anything else. "First/then" contingencies, "do this" imitation drills, and earning the right to preferred activities by obeying.

Why it's bad: It teaches a child that their job is to obey adults, on demand, regardless of how a request feels in their body. That is the exact opposite of the safety skill every child actually needs. ABA produces "compliance, learned helplessness... suppressed autonomy, prompt dependency, [and] adult reliance" in a population already vulnerable to abuse (Sandoval-Norton & Shkedy, *Cogent Psychology* (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311908.2019.1641258>)). And much of what Autistic people refuse isn't defiance: *"Our non-compliance is not intended to be rebellious. We simply do not comply with things that harm us"* (Thinking Autism Guide (<http://www.thinkingautismguide.com/2018/04/on-hans-asperger-nazis-and-autism.html>)). Examined honestly, the compliance project sits on a continuum with coercive control — the same dynamics of obedience, isolation, and erased refusal that we name as abuse in any other relationship (El Dewar, *ABA: a coercive therapy*, NDConnect (<https://ndconnection.co.uk/resources/p/aba-a-coercive-therapy-2n2j2>)).

Discrete Trial Training (DTT) and massed trials

What it is: Breaking a skill into tiny units and drilling them in repeated cycles — instruction, prompted response, reward — sometimes for hours a day across dozens or hundreds of trials.

Why it's bad: It trains performance, not understanding, and it does so at a dosage no child consents to. This is "a child's heart in fight or flight mode, constantly, being bombarded with all these instructions and prompting" (Autistic Science Person (autisticscienceperson.com/2023/...)). Decades on, the evidence that intensive behavioral intervention improves Autistic people's quality of life remains weak (YorkSpace thesis (<https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/items/ec20e1ed-593c-4c71-82b8-0dc6cf4b637a>)).

Reinforcement and token economies

What it is: Granting access to rewards — food, toys, screen time, a favorite object, even affection or breaks — *contingent* on producing target behaviors. Tokens are earned and cashed in for these "backup reinforcers."

Why it's bad: The "rewards" are usually things the child already had a right to. ABA "focuses on training children by holding their sources of happiness hostage and using them as blackmail to get the children to meet goals which are not necessarily in the best interest of their emotional health" ([NeuroClastic \(neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/...\)](https://neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/...)). Manufacturing scarcity around a child's own comfort, then selling it back one compliant act at a time, is coercion dressed as positivity.

Extinction and "planned ignoring"

What it is: Withholding the response that was thought to maintain a behavior until the behavior stops. For "attention-seeking" behavior, this means deliberately ignoring the child. Practitioners expect an "extinction burst" — the behavior escalating before it fades — and are trained to hold the line through it.

Why it's bad: Behavior is communication. Extinction ignores the communication and waits out the distress. *"To be punished for a stress response is harmful and traumatic"* ([End Seclusion \(https://endseclusion.org/articles/the-problem-with-behaviorism/\)](https://endseclusion.org/articles/the-problem-with-behaviorism/)). Teaching a child that escalating need produces *nothing* doesn't build regulation — it builds despair, and it strips away the signal a child uses to ask for help. The corrective is to read behaviour as distress in the first place and respond to the need, not the surface ([National Autistic Taskforce, *Recognising behaviour as distress in practice*, NDConnect \(ndconnection.co.uk/resources/...\)](https://www.ndconnection.co.uk/resources/...)).

Prompting, prompt fading, and hand-over-hand

What it is: Physical, gestural, or verbal prompts used to force a target response, then gradually removed. "Hand-over-hand" means an adult physically manipulating a child's body to perform an action.

Why it's bad: It overrides bodily autonomy as a matter of routine, teaching a child that their body is something adults move for them. It also manufactures the very "prompt dependency" and "adult reliance" ABA later flags as a problem ([Sandoval-Norton & Shkedy \(https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311908.2019.1641258\)](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311908.2019.1641258)). A child who learns their "no" carries no weight over their own hands has been taught a lesson predators rely on.

"Quiet hands" and the suppression of stimming

What it is: Targeting self-stimulatory movement — hand-flapping, rocking, finger movements — for reduction or "extinction," often under instructions like "quiet hands."

Why it's bad: Stimming is self-regulation. Removing it removes the tool an Autistic person uses to stay regulated, and it does so to make the child *look* less Autistic, not to make them feel better. The contrast with animal welfare is damning: *"A good dog trainer doesn't extinguish behaviours which improve the dog's mental health and happiness. But an ABA practitioner may not think twice before doing this to a human child"* ([NeuroClastic \(neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/...\)](https://neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/...)).

Forced and taught eye contact

What it is: Programs that prompt, shape, and reinforce sustained eye contact as a discrete skill.

Why it's bad: For many Autistic people eye contact is painful, overwhelming, or makes listening *harder*. Training it teaches the child to perform comfort they don't feel, prioritizing how neurotypical observers experience the child over how the child experiences the world. It is the whole project in miniature: change the surface, ignore the cost.

Aversives and punishment procedures

What it is: Procedures meant to decrease behavior through unpleasant consequences — response cost (taking earned things away), overcorrection, and, at facilities like the Judge Rotenberg Center, contingent electric shock. Many providers say they've abandoned aversives; punishment logic and extinction remain standard.

Why it's bad: *"Providing a treatment that causes pain in exchange for no benefit, even if unknowingly, is tantamount to torture and violates the most basic requirement of any therapy: to do no harm"* (Sandoval-Norton et al. (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s41252-021-00201-1>)). A field whose history includes electrocuting disabled children for noncompliance has not earned the benefit of the doubt about its gentler rebrands.

The all-day, every-day dosage

What it is: "Generalization" and Early Intensive Behavioral Intervention — extending programming across home, school, and community, often 20–40 hours a week, so there is no setting in which the child is off-program.

Why it's bad: It removes any space where the child gets to simply *be*. One survivor: *"I have ABA therapy and I hate it, probably the worst part of my autism. Everyday I have someone come to my house wake me up and boss me around for 4 hours"* ([source \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmhNWH10UJw\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmhNWH10UJw)). A childhood with no unsurveilled hours is not a childhood.

What the tactics add up to

Pulled apart, each tactic has a tidy clinical rationale. Put back together, they form a single sustained message to a child: *who you are is wrong, and we will reward you for hiding it*.

Trauma. A widely cited 2018 survey by Henny Kupferstein reported that nearly half of ABA-exposed respondents met the diagnostic threshold for PTSD, with markedly raised odds for both children and adults exposed to ABA ([Kupferstein, *Advances in Autism* \(henrykdotcom.files.wordpress.com/2018/...\)](https://henrykdotcom.files.wordpress.com/2018/...)). Later qualitative work documents the same "hidden harms" in adults recalling childhood ABA ([Strathclyde \(pureportal.strath.ac.uk/en/...\)](https://pureportal.strath.ac.uk/en/...)). And a 2025 analysis of US insurance data found Autistic youth who received ABA had a 30% higher risk of mental-health hospitalisation, and a 32% higher frequency of hospitalisations, than those who did not ([Aquirre et al., via NDConnect \(ndconnection.co.uk/resources/...\)](https://ndconnection.co.uk/resources/...)). The harm is not the failure of ABA done badly; sustained ABA is itself the harm ([Long-term ABA therapy is abusive, NDConnect \(https://ndconnection.co.uk/resources/p/long-term-aba-abusive\)](https://ndconnection.co.uk/resources/p/long-term-aba-abusive)).

Bioethics. ABA "manifests systematic violations of the fundamental tenets of bioethics," infringing the principles of justice, nonmaleficence, and — most of all — the autonomy of the child ([Wilkenfeld & McCarthy, *PubMed* \(https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32336692/\)](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32336692/)). It "coercively closes off certain paths of identity formation" ([Project MUSE \(https://muse.jhu.edu/article/753840\)](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/753840)). The neurodiversity manifesto steering group reaches the same verdict from the UK side: ABA cannot be reconciled with Autistic people's rights or wellbeing ([A critique of the use of ABA, NDConnect \(ndconnection.co.uk/resources/...\)](https://ndconnection.co.uk/resources/...)).

Out of date. The behaviorism ABA runs on was refuted decades ago. Chomsky dismantled it as pseudoscience before ABA existed ([The Case Against B.F. Skinner \(https://chomsky.info/19711230/\)](https://chomsky.info/19711230/)). Until ABA incorporates neurology, child development, and modern psychology, "it cannot be considered to be a safe, effective, or ethical field" ([NeuroClastic \(https://neuroclastic.com/2020/10/14/behaviorism-is-dead-how-do-we-tell-the-autism-parents/\)](https://neuroclastic.com/2020/10/14/behaviorism-is-dead-how-do-we-tell-the-autism-parents/)). When the evidence, ethics, and effectiveness of autism interventions are weighed together, the question worth asking is *for whose benefit?* — and the answer is rarely the Autistic child ([For whose benefit?, NDConnect \(https://ndconnection.co.uk/resources/p/ethics-autism-interventions\)](https://ndconnection.co.uk/resources/p/ethics-autism-interventions)).

Rejected by the people it's done to. When polled, the large majority of Autistic adults oppose ABA — including, especially, those who went through it ([NeuroClastic \(neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/...\)](https://neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/); [EUCAP statement \(https://eucap.eu/2024/04/02/aba-statement/\)](https://eucap.eu/2024/04/02/aba-statement/)). Positive Behaviour Support, ABA's softer sibling, is likewise rejected by Disabled People's Organisations on human-rights and evidence grounds ([AMASE \(https://amase.org.uk/pbs/\)](https://amase.org.uk/pbs/)). The same critique runs through NDConnect's PBS writing: PBS inherits behaviourism's blind spots ([On 'Positive Behaviour Support' \(https://ndconnection.co.uk/resources/p/on-positive-behaviour-support\)](https://ndconnection.co.uk/resources/p/on-positive-behaviour-support)), embeds an unexamined orthodoxy in schools ([The Orthodoxy of PBS in Schools \(https://ndconnection.co.uk/blog/pbs-in-schools\)](https://ndconnection.co.uk/blog/pbs-in-schools)), and falls short of a rights-based standard of care ([Culture of Care PBS position statement \(https://ndconnection.co.uk/s/CofC-PBS-Position-Statement-V5.pdf\)](https://ndconnection.co.uk/s/CofC-PBS-Position-Statement-V5.pdf)).

What we do instead

We start from a different premise. The child is not broken; the environment and the expectations around them are. So we change those instead.

- **Presume competence** rather than train compliance.
- **Treat behavior as communication** and ask "how come?" instead of "how do we extinguish it?"
- **Protect stimming and self-regulation** as access needs, not symptoms.
- **Build environments** that fit Autistic bodyminds, rather than drilling Autistic children to fit hostile ones.

Broken systems, not broken people. Nothing about us without us.

There are worked-out alternatives to reach for instead of a behaviour plan. NDConnect's *Against PBS & ABA* work includes a [framework for neurodiversity-affirming interventions](https://ndconnection.co.uk/resources/...) (ndconnection.co.uk/resources/...) and a free, practical [neurodiversity-affirming care and support toolkit](https://ndconnection.co.uk/resources/p/toolkit-nd-affirming-care-and-support) (<https://ndconnection.co.uk/resources/p/toolkit-nd-affirming-care-and-support>) designed as a direct replacement for PBS plans.

References & further reading

- Chris McNutt / Human Restoration Project — [More Human Than a Ladder or Pyramid](http://www.humanrestorationproject.org/writing/...) (www.humanrestorationproject.org/writing/...) and [Empty Pedagogy](http://www.humanrestorationproject.org/writing/...) (www.humanrestorationproject.org/writing/...)
- NeuroClastic — [What Is ABA and Does It Work?](https://neuroclastic.com/2021/04/08/what-is-aba-and-does-it-work/) (<https://neuroclastic.com/2021/04/08/what-is-aba-and-does-it-work/>); [Behaviorism Is Dead. How Do We Tell The \(Autism\) Parents?](https://neuroclastic.com/2020/10/14/behaviorism-is-dead-how-do-we-tell-the-autism-parents/) (<https://neuroclastic.com/2020/10/14/behaviorism-is-dead-how-do-we-tell-the-autism-parents/>); [Is ABA Really Dog Training for Children?](https://neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/) ([neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/...](https://neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/))
- Alfie Kohn — ["It's Not About Behavior"](https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/behavior/) (<https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/behavior/>) and [Autism blog](https://www.alfiekohn.org/blogs/autism/) (<https://www.alfiekohn.org/blogs/autism/>)
- Wilkenfeld & McCarthy — [Ethical Concerns with ABA for Autism \(PubMed\)](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32336692/) (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32336692/>) / [autonomy analysis \(Project MUSE\)](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/753840) (<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/753840>)
- Sandoval-Norton & Shkedy — [How Much Compliance Is Too Much Compliance? \(Cogent Psychology\)](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311908.2019.1641258) (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311908.2019.1641258>) and [follow-up \(Springer\)](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s41252-021-00201-1) (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s41252-021-00201-1>)
- Kupferstein — [Evidence of Increased PTSD Symptoms in Autistics Exposed to ABA](https://henrykdotco.files.wordpress.com/2018/...) (henrykdotco.files.wordpress.com/2018/...)
- University of Strathclyde — [Recalling Hidden Harms](https://pureportal.strath.ac.uk/en/...) (pureportal.strath.ac.uk/en/...)
- End Seclusion — [The Problem with Behaviorism](https://endseclusion.org/articles/the-problem-with-behaviorism/) (<https://endseclusion.org/articles/the-problem-with-behaviorism/>)
- EUCAP — [Statement on ABA](https://eucap.eu/2024/04/02/aba-statement/) (<https://eucap.eu/2024/04/02/aba-statement/>) · AMASE — [Against PBS](https://amase.org.uk/pbs/) (<https://amase.org.uk/pbs/>)

- Noam Chomsky — The Case Against B.F. Skinner (<https://chomsky.info/19711230/>)
 - Audrey Watters — B.F. Skinner: The Most Important Theorist of the 21st Century (<http://hackeducation.com/2018/10/18/skinner>)
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NDConnect — *Against PBS & ABA* series

The full series, with research summaries, original commentary, and an affirming alternative:

Against PBS & ABA (<https://ndconnection.co.uk/against-pbs-aba>). Selected entries:

- El Dewar — ABA: a coercive therapy (<https://ndconnection.co.uk/resources/p/aba-a-coercive-therapy-2n2j2>) (webinar)
 - Neurodiversity Manifesto Steering Group — A critique of the use of Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) (ndconnection.co.uk/resources/...)
 - Long-term ABA therapy is abusive: A response to Gorycki, Ruppel, and Zane (2022) (<https://ndconnection.co.uk/resources/p/long-term-aba-abusive>)
 - Aguirre et al. (2025) — Mental health outcomes associated with ABA in a US national sample of privately insured Autistic youth (ndconnection.co.uk/resources/...)
 - National Autistic Taskforce (2024) — Recognising behaviour as distress in practice — a discussion paper (ndconnection.co.uk/resources/...)
 - For whose benefit? Evidence, ethics and effectiveness of Autism interventions (<https://ndconnection.co.uk/resources/p/ethics-autism-interventions>)
 - On 'Positive Behaviour Support' (<https://ndconnection.co.uk/resources/p/on-positive-behaviour-support>) · The Orthodoxy of PBS in Schools (<https://ndconnection.co.uk/blog/pbs-in-schools>) · Five PBS and ABA blind spots (<https://ndconnection.co.uk/blog/pbs-aba-blind-spots>)
 - Culture of Care — PBS position statement (PDF) (<https://ndconnection.co.uk/s/CofC-PBS-Position-Statement-V5.pdf>)
 - Affirming alternatives: A framework for neurodiversity-affirming interventions (ndconnection.co.uk/resources/...) · Neurodiversity-affirming care and support toolkit (<https://ndconnection.co.uk/resources/p/toolkit-nd-affirming-care-and-support>)
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- Behaviorism (Why Sheet) (<https://stimpunks.org/why/behaviorism/>)
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