

Guidelines for choosing an ABA Provider

An ABA provider (as the term will be used here) is anyone who is offering to start and/or supervise an ABA program for your child. Not everyone is qualified to offer such services, and as much as we'd like to get programs started for our children as quickly as possible, there is a risk that an inadequate program developed by a provider can be more harmful for your child's proper development. The appropriateness of your child's program is dependent primarily on the provider you choose. He or she will be the one determining what skills to work on, how they will be targeted and will teach you and your team the techniques required to implement the program they have created.

How do I know if the provider I am interviewing is qualified to start or supervise an ABA program?

Ask the provider for a resume, which should include their formal training and how long they have been working in the field. Also ask for a list of at least 5 references. These should be families and/or organizations the provider worked with for at least 6 months.

Formal training and experience would ideally include (at minimum):

1. A Master's degree in a related major like Behavioral Analysis, Psychology, Special Education, or Child Development (or equivalent work experience).
2. Employment as Junior Therapist for a variety of individuals (at least 5) with autism, for 3 years, with intensive supervision.
3. Employment as Senior Therapist for a variety of individuals (at least 5) with autism, for 3 years, with supervision.
4. Hands-on training with an established provider in developing programs for a variety of individuals (at least 3) with autism, for 1 year.
5. Experience in training new therapists (at least 10) for their clients.
6. Overall experience with at least 10 different individuals with autism related disorders. Preferably with individuals of varied ages, severities and in different stages of therapy.

When reviewing a provider's resume, keep in mind that some work can be done concurrently (i.e. working as a senior therapist for several families while also working as a supervised consultant for others). However, if any role is skipped or is very brief, that can indicate that he or she does not have the necessary experience.

What questions should I ask to help determine if a provider is appropriate for my child?

If you are still interviewing providers, ask the provider or his or her references these questions (in addition to the typical interview / references questions). Then evaluate those answers with what you know about your own child to determine if this provider is an appropriate match for your child.

If you already have an ABA provider, it's a good idea to evaluate their effectiveness with your child by asking yourself these questions as well.

Ask the provider:

1. **Do you have experience with my child's level and age?** *Be honest when talking to the provider about your child's level. Don't use terms like High-Functioning, Low-Functioning, Autistic Like Tendencies, etc. Just describe your child in your own words.*

How many children like your own have they worked with, and for how long? Ask them to describe the programs they've developed for those children.

2. What stages of therapy have you been involved in?

If you intend to use this provider in the more advanced stages of your child's program, make sure they have already had similar experience in a supervised setting. Many providers have started programs working on beginning skills, but do not know how to work on the more complex and advanced skills that come later as the child develops.

3. What is your process for establishing a program? What kind of assessments do you do? How do you train us and other staff?

Doing assessments and having a written plan before the program is started is critical. The assessment by the provider will give him or her an idea of where your child is developmentally, which will let them know what skills should be a priority and how best to work on them. The provider should at least have an outline of how they plan to train parents and new staff (which may be separate plans).

4. How many children do you serve? How many hours will you be able to work with my team and with my child?

Even though many providers are called "consultants" some interpret this to mean that hands-on interaction with your child or that regular, frequent visits are not necessary. In order to develop a program for your child, the provider needs to fully understand your child and regularly interact with him or her. If the provider is trying to work with too many families, they may not be able effectively serve any of them.

5. Do you develop programs for and assist with self-help and living skills?

A comprehensive program should not be teaching only academics. Many times we all get caught up in the "I just want my child to talk" but helping the child be independent and age-appropriate as possible is essential. But parents are often left to handle these self-help issues as alone as they were before they hired an ABA provider.

6. How do you see your role on my child's team?

Make sure that any ambiguities are clear from the beginning to make sure there are no misunderstandings. Some things to ask about are whether they will help with recruiting junior therapists, provide necessary materials, provide direct therapy (and how much), or be available for emergency consultations (and how). Some providers will do some or all of these, some will do none. It is up to you to decide whether this will work for your child and your child's team.

7. Do you attend on-going trainings, workshops and/or meetings about autism and ABA?

Nobody knows everything. Even though providers are very busy trying to work with as many families as they can because of the enormous need for programs, on-going training and information gathering is necessary and the provider should be making time to attend (many trainings are offered in the evenings and on weekends when it won't interfere with their work or school). There is always new information to be learned from others and areas of programming that can be improved upon.

8. Do you have any specialties?

Anyone who has been running ABA programs long enough and has worked with enough children should have developed an interest or talent in a certain area. This could be working with a certain age or severity or it could be a talent for teaching social skills or self-help skills or others.

Ask the references or yourself:

9. Does the provider develop a program that is appropriate to your child's age and developmental level?

Being appropriate includes making the program fun (they are kids after all!), using the child's interests and keeping drills functional - drills shouldn't be based only on flash cards. The skills should be worked on in as naturalistic and practical a manner as possible. Skills should be worked on because they are a deficit area for your child, and are developmentally appropriate (i.e. your child has the pre-requisite skills). Skills should not be worked on simply because "that's what comes next".

10. Is the provider able to explain the purpose, technique and timing of each drill before including it in curriculum?

Always ask 'why' questions. Why are we working on this? Why should we do it now? Why are we doing it this way? These questions are especially important if the child is not progressing in this area. Answers like "That's just how we do it" are a warning sign.

11. Does the provider plan ahead for generalization and for the next drill?

Even if it will not be implemented until it is reviewed again with the provider, your team should have some idea of where this drill is going – how it will be generalized, or how it will be used in the next step.

12. Is the provider able to troubleshoot drills that the child is not progressing with?

Lack of progress is rarely because the child simply can't get it. If your team has been working on a specific drill for weeks without progress, your provider should be able to assess what is causing the problem (environment, materials, technique, drill format) and make the appropriate changes.

13. Does the provider write and implement effective behavior plans for problem behaviors?

A good ABA program will not only look at teaching the child new skills, but will help with the daily living issues of self-help and behavior problems. This should include an accurate functional analysis of the problem behavior, teaching your team appropriate consequences for the behavior, and a plan for teaching the child new skills to replace the problem behavior.

14. Does the provider demonstrate and encourage in others an appropriate energy level to match your child?

Some children need a fast-paced, active therapy environment with loud, boisterous social reinforcement to keep them engaged. Others need a calmer attitude with "softer" or less physical social reinforcements. Your consultant should be able to

quickly assess what kind of reinforcement and activity level is appropriate for your child and establish the program to match that.

15. Does the provider work cooperatively with the school district, therapists and other providers?

The provider should have a “team” attitude toward everyone, and always have the child’s best interest in mind. Egos and territory should not be a factor.

What do I do if my provider seems unqualified?

If you are still interviewing, ask the provider about the areas you are concerned about. If they can adequately explain their background to your satisfaction, congratulations! If not, simply continue to interview other candidates, or consider using the provider in a different role (if they are interested); find out if they would consider the senior therapist position on your team, while you hire another provider to supervise your program.

If you feel uncomfortable because of a reference’s answers to these questions, or by word of mouth, ask the person acting as a reference for more information. Ask for specifics as to why they were unhappy, and also find out if their child is similar to your own. It is possible that the provider did not do a satisfactory job with that child, but may work better with a child with different deficit and skill sets. You can also ask the provider directly about any area of concern. It’s possible that they have received training since they last worked with that child.

If the provider is already working with you, talk to him or her about the areas of concerns and how they affect your child. Again, your child should come first for everyone on your team. Allow your provider to explain how their program should work, and make any modifications you all feel would help your child. If you feel like it is time to part company with your provider, try to be as honest as possible. If you feel uncomfortable giving feedback to your provider directly, try in a written form, or contact FEAT, and we can do it for you anonymously. If the provider does not know what areas were of concern to you, they may not understand what areas they can improve upon to better work with other children in the future.

What rates are reasonable for my provider to charge me?

If your provider has the minimum training outlined above, and had positive answers from the above questions, they should be qualified to run an ABA program and could reasonably charge rates starting at \$40 / hour. Many providers who have been independently developing ABA programs for 2 or 3 years charge as much as \$60. These rates should obviously increase as the provider’s experience and / or education level increases.