



Medical Policy Name	Applied Behavior Analysis for the Treatment of Autism Spectrum Disorder
Medical Policy Number	20.5.005
Issued By	Chief Medical Officer
Approved By	Medical Directors, Provider Advisory Committee, Corporate Quality Improvement Committee
Original Effective Date	03/2015

**Applies To:** 1/1/2026 to 12/31/2026

## Description of Treatment

ABA attempts to increase skills related to behavioral deficits and reduce behavioral excesses including eliminating barriers to learning. ABA involves a structured environment, predictable routines, individualized treatment, transition and aftercare planning, and family involvement.

## When Services May Be Eligible for Coverage

Coverage for eligible treatments or procedures may be provided only if:

- Benefits are available in the member's contract/certificate, and
- Medical necessity criteria and guidelines are met.

## Criteria

### Overview

Lucet manages Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) benefits for various health plans. This medical policy is used to review and make benefit decisions for ABA service requests for members with the diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Treatments for ASD other than Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) do not fall under the scope of this policy. Those alternative ASD treatment approaches not contemplated in this policy include: Cognitive Training, Auditory Integration Therapy, Facilitated Communication, Higashi Schools/Daily Life, Individual Support Program, LEAP, SPELL, Waldon, Hanen, Early Bird, Bright Start, Social Stories, Gentle Teaching, Response Teaching Curriculum Holding Therapy, Movement Therapy, Music Therapy, Pet Therapy, Psychoanalysis, Son-Rise Program, Scotopic Sensitivity Training, Sensory Integration Training and Neurotherapy (EEG biofeedback). Members are encouraged to consult with their Service Plan Description to determine benefit coverage for non-ABA ASD treatment approaches.

ASD is a medical, neurobiological, developmental disorder, characterized by Core Deficit areas: persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts AND restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, and activities. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)* requires all of these symptoms to be present in early development, and further specifies impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current function.

The defining characteristics of ABA are applied, behavioral, analytic, technological, conceptually systematic, effective, and capable of appropriately generalized outcomes. ABA involves a structured environment, predictable routines, individualized treatment, transition and aftercare planning, and family involvement. ABA attempts to increase skills related to behavioral deficits and reduce behavioral excesses including eliminating barriers to learning. Behavioral deficits may occur in the areas of communication, social and adaptive skills, but are possible in other areas as well. Examples of deficits include a lack of expressive language, inability to request items or actions, limited eye contact with others and inability to engage in age-appropriate self-help skills such as tooth brushing or dressing. Examples of behavioral excesses include physical aggression, property destruction, elopement, self-stimulatory behavior, self-injurious behavior and vocal stereotypy.

During pre-treatment assessment, a treatment plan is developed that identifies the core deficits and aberrant behaviors, and includes designated interventions intended to address these deficits and behaviors and achieve individualized goals. Treatment plans are reviewed for medical necessity (defined below) twice annually (review frequency dependent upon the controlling state law) to allow re-assessment and to document treatment progress.

A Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) may also be a part of any assessment. An FBA consists of:

- a. Description of the problematic behavior (topography, onset/offset, cycle, intensity, severity)
- b. History of the problematic behavior (long-term and recent)
- c. Antecedent analysis (setting, people, time of day, events)
- d. Consequence analysis
- e. Impression and analysis of the function of the problematic behavior

For additional information about ABA treatment, documentation requirements and other topics, please refer to your provider manual and Lucet's [Autism Resource Center](#).

### **Medical Necessity**

Medical necessity is defined in the controlling specific health plan and/or group documents.

### **Service Intensity Classification**

ABA treatment programs are customized specific to the member based upon the findings from the pre-treatment assessment. Service delivery generally follows two treatment models: (1) comprehensive or (2) focused treatment. Providers should select the model needed to achieve the skills identified in the pre-treatment assessment and subsequent reassessments.

#### **Comprehensive**

Comprehensive ABA treatment targets members whose treatment plans address deficits in all core symptoms of Autism. This treatment level, which requires very substantial support, should initially occur in a structured setting with 1:1 staffing and should advance to the least restrictive environment appropriate for the member. This treatment is primarily directed to children ages 3 to 8 years old. Caregiver training is an essential component of Comprehensive ABA treatment. Comprehensive treatments range from 25 to 40 total hours of direct services weekly. Comprehensive treatment includes ABA delivery from ABA provider directly to individual recipient, caregiver training, case supervision, and treatment planning; it may also include ABA services provided in a group setting.

Focused

Focused treatment targets a limited number of behavior goals requiring support of ABA treatment. Behavioral targets include marked deficits in social communication skills and restricted, repetitive behavior such as difficulties coping with change. In cases of specific aberrant and/or restricted, repetitive behaviors, attention to prioritization of skills is necessary to prevent and offset exacerbation of these behaviors, and to teach new skill sets. Identified aberrant behaviors should be addressed with specific procedures outlined in a Behavior Intervention Plan. Emphasis is placed on group work and caregiver training to assist the member in developing and enhancing his/her participation in family and community life, and developing appropriate adaptive, social, or functional skills in the least restrictive environment.

Focused treatments typically range from 10 to 25 total hours of direct services per week. This treatment may include delivery from ABA provider directly to individual recipient or group of recipients, caregiver training, case supervision, and treatment planning.

**ABA PRE-TREATMENT ASSESSMENT REQUEST****MUST MEET ALL OF THE FOLLOWING:**

1. The member has a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) based on criteria used in the current DSM, from a clinician who is licensed and qualified to make such a diagnosis. Such clinicians are usually neurologists, developmental pediatricians, pediatricians, psychiatrists, licensed clinical psychologists or medical doctors experienced in the diagnosis of ASD. State law may define eligible qualified clinicians.
  - a. Documentation of the diagnosis must be accompanied by a clinical note of sufficient depth that allows concordance with current DSM criteria for core symptoms of ASD. Please note: Results of autism screening measures are not an autism diagnosis; a complete diagnostic evaluation must be completed, including an ASD-specific standardized assessment.
  - b. The comprehensive diagnostic evaluation must rule out behavior/medical diagnoses that may have similar symptom presentations. This includes neurological disorders, hearing disorders, behavior disorders and other developmental delays.
2. Hours requested are not more than is required to complete the pre-treatment assessment.
3. All assessment services are provided in a manner consistent with the Lucet Provider Manual, the Behavior Analysis Certification Board's *Ethics Code for Behavior Analysts* or relevant ethics code, generally accepted standards of care, and applicable state laws.

**INITIAL ABA TREATMENT AUTHORIZATION REQUEST****MUST MEET ALL OF THE FOLLOWING:**

1. Diagnostic Criteria as set forth in the previous section are met.
2. Documentation of psychological assessment, including autism-specific testing, adaptive behavior testing and cognitive evaluation to define baseline functioning. Any assessment should be accompanied by a formal report detailing the scores achieved and the results of the assessment.

3. The following baseline data must have been completed no longer than five (5) years prior to or scheduled within ninety (90) days of the pre-treatment assessment. Baseline data must include the following components:
  - a. Developmental and cognitive evaluation
  - b. Autism-specific assessment that identifies the severity of the condition
  - c. Adaptive behavior assessment completed within 6 months of start date of treatment
  - d. Neurological evaluation as part of a comprehensive physical examination
  - e. Information required by state law
4. Treatment goals and clinical documentation must be focused on active ASD core symptoms, deficits that inhibit daily functioning, and aberrant behaviors that require the expertise of a Behavior Analyst. The treatment goals include a plan for stimulus and response generalization in novel contexts.
5. ABA treatment is not designed to primarily attain academic performance.
6. ABA treatment is not a substitute for psychotherapy, occupational therapy or other medical or behavioral health services.
7. Detailed, individualized coordination of care, safety planning, and discharge planning are conducted on an ongoing basis as part of treatment planning.
8. For comprehensive treatment, the requested ABA services are designed to reduce the gap between the member's chronological and developmental ages such that the member is able to develop or restore function to the maximum extent practical (OR) for focused treatment, the requested ABA services are designed to reduce the burden of selected targeted symptoms on the member, family, and other significant people in the environment and to target increases in appropriate alternative behaviors.
9. Treatment is provided in the setting and intensity that is appropriate for the member's clinical needs, determined by where target behaviors are occurring and where treatment is likely to impact those target behaviors.
10. All treatment is provided in a manner consistent with the Lucet Provider Manual, the Behavior Analysis Certification Board's *Ethics Code for Behavior Analysts* or relevant ethics code, generally accepted standards of care, and applicable state laws. In the absence of state law, line therapy services are to be provided by a Registered Behavior Technician (RBT), Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analyst (BCaBA), Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA), or Doctoral level Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA-D).
11. The treatment plan must include a plan to support the member's ability to generalize skills across stimuli, contexts, and individuals, via caregiver training or an appropriate alternative. Provider should be able to demonstrate how instructional control will be transferred to caregivers. In the absence of successful caregiver involvement in treatment, provider should identify an appropriate alternate plan to promote the member's ability to generalize skills outside of therapy sessions, including post-discharge.

**CONTINUED ABA TREATMENT AUTHORIZATION REQUEST  
MUST MEET ALL OF THE FOLLOWING:**

1. Criteria 1-11 in the INITIAL ABA TREATMENT AUTHORIZATION REQUEST section are met.
2. Provider demonstrates:
  - a. Documentation of clinical or social benefit to the child from treatment
  - b. Identification of new or continuing treatment goals
  - c. Development of a new or continuing treatment plan based on progress evidenced by the member's behavioral changes and increased skill acquisition.

## Addendum

### State of Maryland Specific Requirements

#### Overview:

Lucet will conduct utilization review of requests for ABA services provided to citizens of Maryland in compliance with State of Maryland requirements, as outlined below:

#### Definitions:

**Habilitative services:** Services and devices, including occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech therapy, that help a child keep, learn, or improve skills and functioning for daily living.<sup>1</sup>

**Psychological care:** Direct or consultative services provided by a psychologist licensed in the state in which the services are provided or by a social worker licensed in the state in which the services are provided and includes psychotherapy.

**Therapeutic care:** Services provided by a speech-language pathologist, occupational therapist, or physical therapist licensed in the state in which the services are provided.

### ABA PRE-TREATMENT ASSESSMENT REQUEST

Pre-Treatment Assessment requests must include:

1. A comprehensive evaluation of the member by their primary care provider or specialty physician (i.e. Medical Doctor or Doctor of Osteopathy), certifying the need for habilitative services for the treatment of autism spectrum disorder;
2. A prescription for ABA from the member's primary care provider or specialty physician that includes specific treatment goals;

### INITIAL AND CONTINUED ABA TREATMENT AUTHORIZATION REQUEST <sup>2</sup>

Lucet does not require medical necessity review with a prescribing primary care provider or specialty physician more than annually. <sup>3</sup>

Treatment authorization requests must include:

**An annual review by the prescribing primary care provider or specialty physician, in consultation with the habilitative services provider, that includes:**

1. Documentation of benefit to the member.

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<sup>1</sup> COMAR 31.10.39.02; MD Insurance Code § 15-835 (2024)

<sup>2</sup> COMAR 31.10.39.03.C1., 2. And 3.

<sup>3</sup> COMAR 31.10.39.03.C.

2. Identification of new or continuing treatment goals.
3. Development of a new or continuing treatment plan.

Lucet will not deny coverage based solely on:

1. The number of habilitative services prescribed, for: <sup>4</sup>
  - a. Less than or equal to 25 hours per week in the case of a child who is at least 18 months of age and who not reached the child's sixth birthday, or
  - b. Less than or equal to 10 hours per week in the case of a child who has reached the child's sixth birthday and who has not reached the child's nineteenth birthday.
2. Services occurring in the member's educational setting <sup>5</sup>; or
3. The basis that applied behavior analysis is experimental or investigational. <sup>6</sup>

ABA services must be provided by professionals who are licensed, certified, or otherwise authorized under the Health Occupations Article <sup>7</sup> or similar licensing, certification, or authorization requirements of another state or U.S. territory where the habilitative services are provided. <sup>8</sup> (NOTE: Lucet is not delegated to provide habilitative services such as OT, PT, or ST by the health plan carrier.)

## Summary of Evidence

**The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition** outlines the diagnostic criteria of autism spectrum disorder. It discusses diagnostic features, associated features, prevalence, severity of ASD (specifiers), development of ASD, course of ASD, risk factors, and prognostic factors. It further covers diagnostic issues related to culture, gender, association with suicide, functional consequences, differential diagnosis, and co-morbidity.

**The 2021 Surveillance of Autism** outlines how Autism is diagnosed and treated in the United Kingdom. It reviews recommendations for recognition, referral, diagnosis, support, and management in those up to age 19 along with diagnosis and management in those over the age of 19.

**The Ethics Code for Behavior Analysts** outlines four foundational principles that every behavior analyst is recommended to strive to embody. They are to benefit others; treat others with compassion, dignity, and respect; behave with integrity, and ensure their own competence.

**Applied Behavior Analysis, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition** provides a comprehensive and updated description of applied behavior analysis. It outlines the principles and procedures for changing and analyzing socially important behaviors. It covers selecting, defining, and measuring behavior; evaluating and analyzing behavior change; reinforcement; punishment; antecedent variables; verbal behavior; developing behavior; decreasing behavior without punishment; functional assessment, and promoting generalized behavior change; negative reinforcement; motivation; verbal behavior; functional behavioral assessment; and ethics.

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<sup>4</sup> COMAR 31.10.39.03.D.

<sup>5</sup> COMAR 31.10.39.03.F.(1)

<sup>6</sup> COMAR 31.10.39.03.G.

<sup>7</sup> Note: Maryland law only allows LBAs to practice ABA. 17-6A-10 (a)

<sup>8</sup> COMAR 31.10.03.E.

The Article, **Identification, Evaluation, and Management of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder** published by the American Academy of Pediatrics, outlines the prevalence, the areas where youth with this condition need support, and communicates that evidence-based treatments may improve functioning. It highlights that co-morbidities need to be kept in mind during evaluation and the course of treatment. And it highlights the importance of collaborating with families to determine interventions.

The **Efficacy of ABA for Individuals with Autism Across the Lifespan** article discusses how applied behavior analysis necessarily evolves over the course of an individual's lifespan shifting from instruction of comprehensive skill repertoires to focusing on more adaptive skills for functioning in vocational, personal, community and leisure settings.

The **Work, living, and the pursuit of happiness: Vocational and psychosocial outcomes for young adults with autism** article highlights the importance of adaptive skills, friendships, and verbal intelligence. It also focuses on the importance of familial support and increasing independence of the individual in close collaboration with the family.

The **Early Intensive Behavioral Intervention (EIBI) for Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders** article discusses the evidence supporting the efficacy of this treatment which is based on ABA and aims to lessen the impact of ASD. The article describes the treatment that is typically delivered for multiple years at 20-40 hours per week.

The University of North Carolina **Evidence based practices for children, youth, and young adults with Autism** report is a systematic review of the literature and outlines a set of practices that have clear evidence of positive effects in the treatment of autistic children and youth.

The **Autism Intervention Meta-Analysis of Early Childhood Studies (Project AIM)** article synthesizes recent high-quality evidence supporting the effectiveness of specific early childhood interventions for autism. However, only naturalistic developmental behavioral interventions (NDBIs) show effectiveness in addressing core challenges associated with autism.

The article **Measures used to assess treatment outcomes in children with autism receiving early and intensive behavioral interventions** reviews outcome measures used in clinical practice for children with ASD. Key recommendations include use of tools with strong psychometric properties that assess real-world functioning.

## Exceptions

Exceptions to this medical policy must be approved by Lucet Chief Medical Officer or their designee.

## References

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**Services**, MD Insurance Code § 15-835 (2024). Maryland Insurance Code Section 15-835 (2024) - Required Coverage for Habilitative Services :: 2024 Maryland Code :: U.S. Codes and Statutes :: U.S. Law :: Justia.

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11. Ridout, S., & Eldevik, S. (2024). Measures used to assess treatment outcomes in children with autism receiving early and intensive behavioral interventions: A review. *Review. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 11, 607–619. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40489-023-00355-9>
12. Sandbank et al. Autism intervention meta-analysis of early childhood studies (Project AIM): updated systematic review and secondary analysis. *BMJ* 2023;383:e076733 <https://www.bmj.com/content/383/bmj-2023-076733>,

## Related Documents

### GUIDES / HANDOUTS



N/A

## FORMS

N/A

## Document History

Date	Action	By Whom	Summary
10/2025	Revision	Medical Policy Workgroup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Added addendum for the state of Maryland</li> <li>Clarified language about baseline data requirement.</li> <li>Added 3 references.</li> <li>Removed 1 reference.</li> </ul>
09/2024	Revision	Chief Medical Officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Added summary of evidence.</li> <li>Updated 2 references.</li> </ul>
01/2024	Annual Review	Chief Medical Officer	
09/2023	Annual Review	Chief Medical Officer	
09/2022	Revision	Chief Medical Officer	
08/2021	Revision	Chief Medical Officer	
10/2020	Revision	Chief Medical Officer	
09/2019	Revision	Chief Medical Officer	
12/2018	Revision	Chief Medical Officer	
03/2015	New	Chief Medical Officer	

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