

# Alternatives to Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)

## Action

Ensure that all appropriate therapies are provided to children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and that Congress does not pass health care or education legislation that could have the unintended consequence of designating applied behavioral analysis (ABA) therapy as the sole means to treat ASD.

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## Background

There is a growing trend in both education and health care settings to utilize ABA specialists to provide services to children identified with autism spectrum disorder. Although ABA may be an effective therapy, so are others, such as speech-language pathology. Unfortunately, schools are frequently utilizing only ABA services. In many cases, insurance companies are denying speech-language pathology claims where children are already receiving ABA services. ASHA does not oppose the use of ABA services; however, singling it out in legislation as the only treatment for behavioral health issues for individuals with developmental disabilities—including those with ASD—limits consumer choice. Therefore, we urge members of Congress to use caution when writing ASD legislation to ensure that all therapies, not just ABA therapy, are included for coverage.

According to reports from speech-language pathologists, a growing number of students with ASD are being denied necessary school-based speech and language services. ASHA members believe this trend is due to some school systems' sole reliance on ABA therapists to oversee, recommend, and provide services to students with ASD. The exclusive use of ABA interventions for these students violates their right to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) as mandated under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

In Tricare, the Department of Defense's health care program, there are efforts under way that may have the unintended consequence of denying habilitative services to some individuals with developmental disabilities by restricting the choice of treatment—and, hence, provider—to ABA therapy. Habilitative services that help a person keep, learn, or improve skills include physical and occupational therapy as well as speech-language pathology. Individuals with autism spectrum disorder—who make up a subset of the population with developmental disabilities—may need habilitative services as well as behavioral treatments, such as ABA.

With respect to Medicaid coverage, some states have requested and been granted waivers that place ABA therapists as the sole gatekeepers for ASD services to children, effectively eliminating other service options for the families of children with autism. Both the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) and the U.S. Department of Education have issued guidance on this concern. CMS guidance states, "While much of the current national discussion focuses on one particular treatment modality called Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA), there are other recognized and emerging treatment modalities for children with ASD." The U.S. Department of Education guidance document recognizes the importance of speech-language pathology services and the necessary role of a speech-language pathologist in both evaluation and treatment of children with ASD.