

TROUBLESHOOTING ABA STRATEGIES

GOAL

To help you analyze and adjust ABA strategies when they don't seem to be working, so you can better support your child's progress and problem-solve effectively.

BACKGROUND

As a parent, you've worked hard to implement ABA strategies to support your child's learning and behavior. But sometimes, despite your best efforts, a strategy doesn't seem to be working. More often than not, small adjustments can make a big difference.

Children may struggle with ABA strategies because:

- They don't fully understand what's expected
- They need a different approach
- The strategy itself needs modification
- Their needs or environment have changed

Problem-solving is a skill that parents can develop, and with a few simple troubleshooting steps, you can refine strategies and help your child succeed.

TROUBLESHOOTING ESSENTIALS

Troubleshooting is an integral part of ABA services. It's how we learn what works for each individual child. Making changes doesn't mean you did something wrong, it means that your getting closer to making things better.

Keep in mind:

- Small adjustments can make a big difference.
- Behavior might temporarily get worse before improving.
- Look for patterns.
- Your approach matters.
- Know when to ask for help.

Understanding how to analyze and adjust ABA strategies allows you to problem-solve effectively instead of abandoning interventions prematurely. The following steps will guide you in troubleshooting, adjusting, and finding what works best for your child.

STEP 1: CHECK YOUR EXPECTATIONS

Use this checklist to ensure you're giving the strategy enough time and assessing progress accurately:

Have I given the strategy enough time to work? Some changes take days or even weeks to show results.

Is my child's resistance part of an extinction burst? Behavior may temporarily get worse before improving.

Am I expecting progress too quickly? Learning new behaviors takes time and consistency.

Have I looked for small signs of improvement? Progress isn't always immediate but may show in subtle ways.

Am I focusing only on the final outcome? Celebrate small steps in the right direction.

Have I considered outside factors? Fatigue, hunger, or sensory sensitivities can impact behavior and response to strategies.

Am I adjusting too quickly? Changing strategies too soon can prevent the child from fully learning the new behavior.

Do I need to check in with my BCBA®? If you're unsure whether to continue or modify an approach, seeking guidance can help.

One of the most frustrating things for parents is when things seem to get worse before they get better. But here's the thing—that can actually be a sign that the strategy is working!

For example, let's say your child is used to getting what they want by crying or yelling. Now, you're teaching them to ask instead. At first, they may cry even more because they're realizing their old way doesn't work anymore. This is called an extinction burst—it's your child's subconscious way of testing if you really mean it.

Ensuring that your expectations are reasonable can reduce frustration for both you and your child.

STEP 2: DEFINE THE PROBLEM

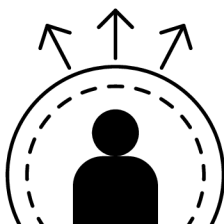
Before making any changes, you need to clearly identify what isn't working. Is the strategy itself ineffective, or is there something about how it's being delivered that needs adjustment? Take a step back and ask yourself the following questions:



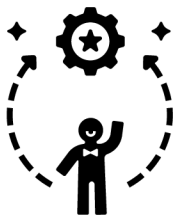
Is my child struggling to understand what's expected?



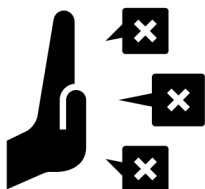
Are they getting frustrated or upset when using this strategy?



Does the intervention work sometimes but not in other situations?



Are there times when my child is more successful with this skill?

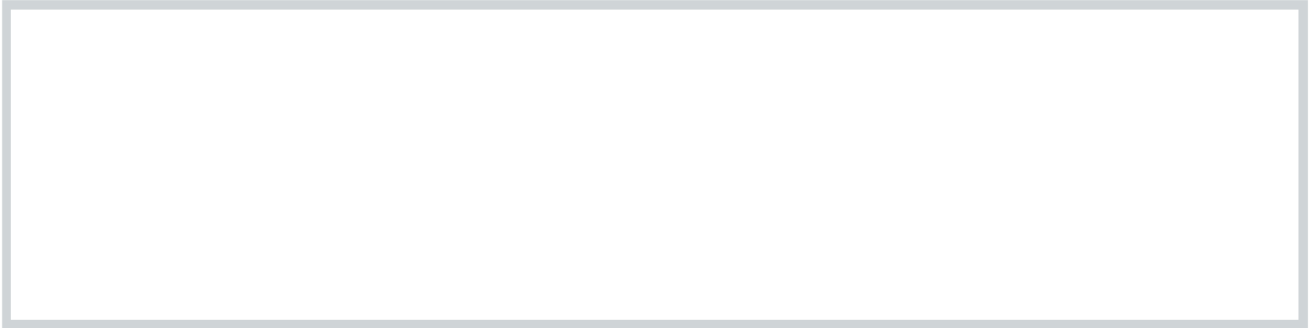


Is my child motivated to participate, or do they resist the process?

BREAK DOWN THE ISSUE

Once you've identified that something isn't working, the next step is to determine why. Make a note of what might be impacting the effectiveness of the intervention.

The strategy itself: Is it the right approach for your child? Some strategies work well for certain children but may not be the best fit for yours.



The way it's being delivered: Timing, tone, and body language all affect how a child responds to an intervention. If the delivery feels stressful or unclear, they may resist it.



Other external factors: Fatigue, hunger, sensory sensitivities, or environmental distractions can all impact whether a strategy is effective.



STEP 3: MAKE A SMALL ADJUSTMENT

Once you've identified the problem, it's time to make a small change and test whether it improves the situation. Changing too much at once can make it difficult to see what actually helps. Instead, try one of the following adjustments:

MODIFY THE WAY INSTRUCTIONS ARE GIVEN.

Try using a visual prompt, reducing verbal instructions, or modeling the action instead of simply telling your child what to do.

ADJUST REINFORCEMENT.

Make sure the reward is something meaningful to your child and delivered immediately after the desired behavior.

CHANGE THE TIMING.

If transitions are difficult, try offering extra time, a countdown, or a structured warning before a change occurs.

MODIFY THE ENVIRONMENT.

Reduce distractions, adjust lighting or noise levels, or create a more structured setting to support learning.

Example: Improving Morning Dressing

If your child resists getting dressed each morning, try choosing 1 of the following:

- Letting them choose between two outfit options to provide a sense of control.
- Using a first/then statement (e.g., "First shirt, then breakfast") to create structure.
- Offering a preferred activity after dressing to increase motivation.

By making small, targeted changes, you can assess what helps your child succeed and refine the strategy accordingly.

STEP 4: OBSERVE AND ASSESS

After making an adjustment, take time to observe how your child responds. Ask yourself:

- Is the behavior improving, staying the same, or getting worse?
- Does the strategy work better in some situations than others?
- Is my child showing small signs of progress that I might have overlooked?

GIVE IT TIME

- **Some strategies take longer to show results.** Be patient and allow your child time to adjust.
- **Watch for patterns.** If the strategy works at certain times or in specific environments, that's a clue about what's helping or hindering progress.
- **If no progress is made after a reasonable amount of time,** try another small adjustment or consult your BCBA®.

WHAT ARE YOUR NEXT STEPS?

STEP 5: KNOW WHEN TO SEEK HELP

Sometimes, even with adjustments, a strategy still isn't working. If you've tried multiple small changes and are still not seeing progress, it may be time to seek additional support from your BCBA®. A professional can help:

IDENTIFY UNDERLYING FACTORS.

Sometimes a lack of progress is caused by something outside the strategy itself, such as sensory sensitivities, medical issues, or environmental stressors. Observing your child's behavior across different settings can help uncover hidden barriers.

PROVIDE ADDITIONAL TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES.

Sometimes a child needs a different approach to support learning. A BCBA® can introduce new strategies, such as alternative reinforcement systems, modified prompts, or new skill-building techniques.

ADJUST THE STRATEGY BASED ON DATA AND OBSERVATIONS.

If a strategy isn't working, reviewing past successes and challenges can guide necessary changes. A BCBA® can help track progress and refine interventions based on measurable outcomes.


ENSURE CONSISTENCY ACROSS CAREGIVERS.

If a strategy works in one setting but not another, it may be due to inconsistent implementation. A BCBA® can help create a plan that ensures all caregivers are using the same approach to maximize effectiveness.

If you ever feel stuck or overwhelmed, remember—you're not in this alone. Seeking help is a sign of strength and an important step toward supporting your child's success.

QUESTIONS TO ASK THE BCBA®



A grayscale photograph of a man and a child walking away from the camera on a path. The man is in the foreground, wearing a dark jacket and pants, walking towards the right. The child is slightly behind him, also walking towards the right. The path is surrounded by trees and foliage, and the background is a bright, hazy landscape.

**Do the best you can
until you know better.
Then when you know
better, do better.**

~Maya Angelou