

# ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR PARENTS

## GOAL

To help you make thoughtful, values-aligned decisions when navigating challenging moments in your child's ABA program, and to give you tools for advocating for ethical, compassionate care.

## BACKGROUND

As a parent, you want what's best for your child—but navigating ABA programs can bring up tough decisions. You might wonder:

- Is this strategy respectful of my child's needs?
- How do I balance consistency with kindness?
- What should I do if something doesn't feel right?

These are valid and important questions. Some autistic adults have shared their experiences of ABA as harmful or traumatic, especially when their autonomy or sensory needs were ignored. Understanding this perspective helps ensure your child's support system is truly compassionate and respectful.

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Even evidence-based strategies can become harmful if used rigidly. You know your child best, and it's okay to speak up when something doesn't feel right. Watch for signs like:

- Increased anxiety or distress after sessions
- Rigid responses to sensory or communication needs
- Strategies that feel more controlling than supportive

You don't need all the answers—just the confidence to ask questions and advocate for compassionate, individualized care.

# SHIFTING FROM CONTROL TO COLLABORATION

It's natural to want to guide your child's behavior, especially when you're trying to teach important skills. But when strategies feel too controlling—like forcing eye contact, demanding compliance without flexibility, or insisting on exact behaviors—they can lead to resistance, stress, and even shutdown.

Instead, collaboration allows your child to feel seen and respected while still learning. By noticing their cues and adjusting your expectations, you create an environment where learning can happen without coercion.

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## **SIGNS YOU MIGHT BE CONTROLLING RATHER THAN SUPPORTING**

- Your child seems anxious or avoidant during learning activities
- Your child resists or shuts down when asked to do something
- Your child shows signs of distress, like crying, yelling, or running away

When we shift toward working with our children rather than doing things to them, their trust—and their willingness—grow.

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## **TEACHING WITH RESPECT AND FLEXIBILITY**

Effective teaching honors your child's pace, preferences, and needs. That doesn't mean letting go of expectations—it means adjusting how you get there.

By supporting autonomy, you're not giving in; you're giving your child a voice in their own learning journey. That might mean offering choices, building in movement breaks, or being open to alternative ways to meet a goal.

Strategies that respect autonomy and reduce power struggles:

- Offer choices whenever possible (e.g., "Do you want to use crayons or markers?")
- Use clear, kind communication rather than commands
- Recognize and respect sensory needs before placing demands

Support doesn't have to be rigid to be effective. Flexibility often leads to better learning—and a stronger connection with your child.

# TRUSTING YOUR GUT

You don't need to be an expert in ABA to know when something doesn't sit right. If a strategy feels too rigid, or your child seems disconnected or distressed, your instincts are worth listening to. This page will help you recognize potential concerns and give you language to start important conversations with your child's care team.

## WHEN SOMETHING DOESN'T FEEL RIGHT

As a parent, you know your child better than anyone. If something about your child's services or learning plan feels off, you're allowed—and encouraged—to speak up. You don't need a clinical background to raise a valid concern. Your observations and instincts are essential in building a program that supports your child well.

Sometimes it's not about a major issue, but a quiet discomfort:

- "This feels too rigid for my child."
- "My child shuts down after this part of services."
- "I don't think they're really learning—I think they're complying."

These thoughts matter.

## SPEAKING UP DOESN'T MEAN CONFLICT

You don't have to be confrontational to raise a concern. Many BCBAs genuinely want to do what's best for your child and will welcome your insight. Use collaborative language to invite a conversation:

- "I've noticed my child seems really overwhelmed during this part of the session. Could we talk about what's happening?"
- "I'm wondering if there's another way we can approach this goal."
- "My child does best when they feel in control. Can we find ways to give them more choice?"

When everyone on the team communicates openly, the result is a more ethical, effective, and compassionate plan.

## WHAT TO WATCH FOR

If you're unsure whether something is worth bringing up, consider whether any of these red flags are present:

- Your child regularly seems distressed or withdrawn during services
- You're told that your child is being noncompliant, without efforts to understand why
- The same strategies are used even when they clearly aren't working
- Your child's sensory or communication needs are being overlooked
- You feel like the goal is compliance over learning or connection

Even one of these signs is reason enough to pause and ask questions.

# YOUR VALUES, YOUR VOICE

You are the expert on your child. While professionals may bring knowledge of ABA strategies, no one knows your child's needs, strengths, and history better than you. Your voice matters—especially when it comes to making decisions that shape your child's day-to-day experiences. As you partner with your care team, take a moment to reflect on what's most important to you as a parent. When you clearly understand your values, it becomes easier to advocate for approaches that feel supportive, respectful, and right for your child.

## What matters most to you?

Here are some questions to help you think about the role you want ABA services to play in your child's life:

- What are your biggest hopes for your child in the next year?
- What do you want your child to feel during sessions (safe, confident, included)?
- Are there strategies you've seen in the past that didn't feel right?
- What boundaries or goals do you want to protect as a parent?

## It's okay to speak up


Even if you're not sure exactly what to say, it's okay to share when something doesn't feel right. Most professionals want your feedback and value your perspective.

Try phrases like:

- "Can we explore a different way to approach this goal?"
- "This strategy doesn't seem to align with how my child learns best."
- "I'd like to make sure we're respecting their sensory needs in this routine."

What's one thing you wish your BCBA® or care team understood about your child?



The background of the image shows the silhouettes of several people clapping their hands. The scene is set against a very bright, hazy sky, which creates a high-contrast, almost ethereal atmosphere. The silhouettes are dark and detailed, showing the outlines of heads, shoulders, and hands in motion. The overall composition is centered, with the clapping hands forming a focal point in the upper middle section.

**If you don't know  
what you value,  
someone else will  
decide for you.**

~Roy Disney