

# ACCESS TO EARLY BEHAVIORAL TREATMENT

---

**Rebecca Thompson, PhD BCBA-D**

Director of Clinical Services  
Wisconsin Early Autism Project

President, Wisconsin Autism  
Providers Association (WAPA)

**Janice Miles**

Clinical Director  
Caravel Autism Health

Vice President, Wisconsin Autism  
Providers Association (WAPA)

# Overview

- What is ABA and how does it work?
- How significant are access challenges for services?
- What are the barriers to accessing ABA treatment?
- How can we address these challenges?

# One Family's ABA Journey

# WHAT IS ABA?

---

# What is ABA?

- Applied Behavior Analysis is a field of study that seeks to understand and improve the way people learn
  - All behavior happens for a reason
- Break complex skills down into small, achievable steps
- Use of repetition, prompting, and rewards to help clients experience success and want to engage in learning
- Develop individualized goals, frequently measure progress, adjust teaching strategies to maximize progress toward goals

# How does ABA help children with ASD?

## Behaviors to Increase

- Communication skills
  - Speech, sign language, PECS, tablet
- Social Interaction skills
  - Toy play, turn taking, sharing, peer play
- Learning to Learn skills
  - Imitation, attending to learning tasks
- Self-help skills
  - Toilet training, community safety

## Behaviors to Decrease

- Aggression
- Self-injury
- Tantrums
- Elopement
- Dangerous behaviors

# How do we know ABA works?

- Decades of research has demonstrated that ABA can help children with ASD by increasing **communication, social skills, and adaptive skills** as well as **reducing challenging behaviors**
- ABA is recommended as the treatment of choice for children with ASD by:
  - United States Surgeon General
  - American Academy of Pediatrics
  - National Institute of Mental Health
  - National Institute of Child Health and Human Development
  - Autism Society of America

What does  
ABA  
look like?

Structured  
Teaching:  
Imitation Skills



What does  
ABA  
look like?

Deliberate  
Teaching in  
Play: Verbal  
Imitation

# Comprehensive Treatment Programs

- Early Intensive Behavioral Intervention (EIBI)
  - Clients are typically pre-school aged
- 30-40 hours/week, for up to 3-4 years
- **Goal = Close the developmental gap**
- Many treatment goals across multiple domains of functioning

# Focused Treatment Programs

- Non-intensive treatment: 10-20 hours per week, typically lasting 6-12 months
- Treatment is focused on a small number of high-priority goals
  - Reduction of maladaptive behavior
  - Development of targeted skills
- *Note: Clearly investment and attention is needed for individuals with ASD of all ages and levels of need. This symposium focuses on access to Early Intervention; thus today's presentation will primarily discuss Comprehensive Treatment.*

# Long-term Benefits of Early Intervention

- It's easier to learn new skills and develop new habits earlier in life
  - Consider learning a 2<sup>nd</sup> language (easier for kids than adults)
- Early Intensive Behavioral Intervention teaches children essential skills that will allow them more independence, dignity, and happiness throughout their life
- Investing in early treatment will reduce the level of support children need as they grow up, across environments
  - Home
  - School / Workforce
  - Community
  - Public Safety

# Who can provide ABA services?

Title	Qualifications	Duties	Client Contact
Behavior Treatment <b>Technician</b>	Age 18+ HS Diploma/GED 40 hours training	Working directly w/ client, under supervisor's direction	30 - 40 / week
Behavior Treatment <b>Therapist</b>	BA + 2000 hours OR MA + 400 hours	Supervising technicians in delivering treatment	5 / week 10-20% of direct treatment hours
Behavior Treatment <b>Licensed Supervisor</b>	Licensed BCBA + 4000 hours experience	Assessment Treatment planning Modifying protocol	1 / week to 1 / month

*Note: This table illustrates the qualifications for each level of staff included in the ForwardHealth Behavior Treatment Benefit. We would NOT recommend any changes to these requirements.*

# What or Who is a BCBA?

- The Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB) is the national organization that establishes standards for individuals to be credentialed in the field of ABA
- Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA)
  - Master's Degree in ABA or related field
  - Completes Supervised Clinical Experience
  - Passes National Certification Exam
  - Completes annual continuing education to maintain certification
- BCBA's are licensed service providers in Wisconsin

# Early Intervention Graduates

# Is it worth the investment?

There are several studies that illustrate the long-term cost effectiveness of investing in early intervention programs

- Jacobson et al 1998 *Behavioral Interventions* "Cost-benefit estimates for early intensive behavioral intervention for young children with autism—general model and single state case"
  - Estimated Cost savings per person from early autism treatment
  - **\$185,000 from age 3-22; \$650,000 from age 3-55**
- Motiwala et al 2006 "The cost-effectiveness of expanding intensive behavioral intervention to all autistic children in Ontario"
- Piccininni et al 2017 *JAMA Pediatrics* "Cost-effectiveness of wait time reduction for intensive behavioral intervention services in Ontario, Canada."
- Merahn 2019 *Grand Rapids Business Journal* "Investing in intensive intervention reduces future burden"



# HOW SIGNIFICANT ARE ACCESS CHALLENGES FOR SERVICES?

---

# August 2020 WAPA Surveys



- Access to Autism Services
  - 1) ASD Evaluation Providers
    - 24 of 43 (57%) responded
  - 2) ABA Treatment Providers
    - 34 of 41 (83%) responded

# Thank You to our Survey Participants!!!

- Autism Behavioral Network
  - (Pediatric Psychology Associates)
- Counseling Resources
- Different Minds
- Early Autism Services
- FamilyPath Autism Services
- Fox Valley Autism Treatment Program
- Neuropsychological Associates
- Phoenix Behavioral Health
- Wisconsin Early Autism Project

# Survey Results: ASD Evaluations Access

- Waitlists
  - 1100+ children reported to be currently waiting for evaluations
  - (57% response rate implies closer to 2000 children are actually waiting)
- Wait times
  - Multiple providers have waits in excess of 9 months
- Re-evaluations: 43% of providers say at least 10% of their evaluations are re-assessments for children who have already been diagnosed with ASD

# Survey Results – ABA Treatment Access

- 3000+ children currently enrolled in ABA treatment
  - 56% of providers report at least 15% of treatment hours are unstaffed
  - 1395 (less than half) of current clients have Medicaid as primary payor
  - 23% of providers are only accepting commercial insurance clients
- Waitlists: 1300+ children reported on waitlists
  - 103 Medicaid Children added to wait lists each week
  - 43% of providers report a waitlist of 6 months or longer (for MA clients)

# Survey Results – ABA Treatment Access

- Limited Geographic Reach:
  - 58% of providers limit their travel to 30 miles or less from their main office, due to lack of reimbursement for travel
  - Some providers only provide center-based services to avoid travel expenses
- General Comments:
  - Over half of providers complained about cumbersome Medicaid Prior Authorization Process

What are the barriers to  
accessing ABA treatment?

---

How can we address these  
challenges?

# Why Is It Difficult to Access ABA Treatment?

## Staff Shortages At All Levels, High Turnover

- Current clients do not access recommended treatment hours
- Waitlists for new clients
- Lower quality of care (new vs experienced staff)
- Significant cost to providers for recruiting and training new staff

## Potential Solutions

- Funding for staff recruitment and training
- Educational incentives/grants for higher education in behavior analysis
- Student loan forgiveness for BCBAs



# Why Is It Difficult to Access ABA Treatment?

## Forwardhealth Challenges

- Low reimbursement rates
- Lack of reimbursement for concurrent services
- Cumbersome prior authorization process (see next slide)
- Complex billing Procedures (see following slides)

## Potential Solutions

- Increase reimbursement rates
- Subsidies for providers who serve a minimum % of Forwardhealth clients
- Allow concurrent billing
- Reduce document submission requirements for authorizations
- When FH is the secondary payor, accept the prior auth from the primary payor.
- Allow all services to be billed under licensed supervisor like commercial insurance

# Prior Authorization Requirements

## Forwardhealth (\* age 6+)

- Cover Sheet (PARF)
- Copy of Treatment Plan
- Copy of Diagnosis
- Prescription for ABA Treatment
- **PA/BTA form (6 page document)\***
- **Recent Diagnosis/Testing\***
- **Copy of School IEP\***
- **Detailed Schedule: Treatment/School/  
Other Therapies**

## Commercial Insurance

- Cover sheet (Patient Information, codes requested)
- Copy of Treatment Plan
- Sometimes copy of Diagnosis, especially for initial authorization/ start of services
  
- UBH- Live review, must speak with a clinician at Optum

# Claim Submission Requirements

## Forwardhealth

- All Staff at all levels need to be registered as a provider
- Separate claim for each staff, per day
- 4-10 separate claims per day for each client
- Submitted via outdated FH portal or PES Software. Portal is slow and glitchy

## Commercial Insurance

- Only the licensed supervisor is registered
- All treatment hours billed under the supervisor, per day
- 1-3 lines billed together on one claim for each client per day
- Submitted via EDI with user friendly software or easily outsourced

*It takes **4 times as long** to bill the same services to Forwardhealth v commercial insurance.*

# Why Is It Difficult to Access ABA Treatment?

## Challenges with Commercial Insurance

- 50% of Commercial Policies do not cover ABA in WI
- Require high # hours of parent participation, treatment goals for parent's behavior, and progress on parent goals (violation of MHPAEA)
- Require high # or % hours of BCBA contact with client or staff (beyond what is possible to staff with current staff shortages) \**TRICARE, CIGNA*

## Potential Solutions

- Update Autism Treatment Mandate to reduce loopholes
- Require self-funded policies to cover ABA
- Prohibit parent participation requirements for children to access medically necessary treatment
- Prohibit case supervision requirements that exceed FH requirements

# Why Is It Difficult to Access ABA Treatment?

## Challenges with Delivering Equitable Treatment

- Difficult to staff teams in rural areas
- Difficult to staff teams in City of Milwaukee
- Ethnic minorities are less likely to access treatment
- Shortage of bilingual staff, cost of providing interpreters

## Potential Solutions

- Increase access to telehealth by providing technology, Wi-Fi
- Subsidize travel costs for in-home services
- Funding for treatment centers in rural areas and Milwaukee
- Funding for transportation to treatment centers
- Subsidies for providers who serve a % of clients in rural areas and city of Milwaukee
- Outreach to ethnic minority communities to educate about ASD and treatment options
- Funding for interpreters
- Educational incentives for bilingual individuals to pursue higher education in ABA

# Most Impactful Suggested Solutions

- Reimbursement rate increase
  - Allows providers to spend funds where it will have the biggest impact for their region
- Close loopholes allowing commercial insurance to not cover ABA
  - Provides relief to state budget, by reducing number of children using Forwardhealth as primary payor for treatment
- FH coverage of Concurrent Billing
- Travel Reimbursement/Incentives
- Funding for Treatment Centers in hard to staff areas

# Intervention -> Independence -> Community Results

*"We have got to work on keeping these children engaged with the world."*

*- Temple Grandin*

*"The most important thing people did for me was to expose me to new things."*

*- Temple Grandin*

# THANK YOU!

---

Rebecca Thompson

[rebecca.thompson@wiautism.com](mailto:rebecca.thompson@wiautism.com)

Janice Miles

[jmiles@caravelautism.com](mailto:jmiles@caravelautism.com)