



Parent Involvement in ABA / IBI

By PEGGY HAILSTONE

How, why & what for?

It's commonly acknowledged that parents play a pivotal role in their children's ongoing learning and development. How does this fit with ABA/IBI for autism, and what are the benefits for children and families?

Freelance writer, Peggy Hailstone, gets the specifics on parental involvement from Melbourne-based psychologist and senior EIBI specialist, Kim Sheppard.

Q: A family running an ABA/IBI program is typically surrounded by a team. What does this look like? Who's involved?

A: A typical ABA/IBI team for a child with autism involves a number of key people. An inclusive team would involve a service provider (which may be an individual or an organisation), a psychologist, one or more ABA therapists, professionals from several complimentary disciplines, and the child's parent/s. Most importantly, the child's parent/s head up the team, sourcing and employing their child's therapists and engaging and liaising with required professionals. Many parents will also chose to provide direct therapeutic treatment to their child.

Most home-based IBI programs are managed by a service provider. Service providers must satisfy certain criteria (good-practice in early intervention, use of evidence-based therapies, a demonstrated plan as to how their service will be delivered) which assures parents of professional standards. The service provider will have demonstrated

experience and qualifications relevant to providing scientifically validated ABA/IBI program support to children with ASD and their families. service providers may additionally have access to, and provide families with, instructors (or discrete trial therapists) who work directly with the child in the family's home, kindergarten, or school.

Complimentary team members including psychologists, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, paediatricians, and kindergarten and school teachers who also play an important role in the child's ongoing program.

Q: How important is the involvement of a child's parent in the provision of ABA/IBI?

A: Parental involvement is consistently seen as imperative to treatment success. Apart from positively affecting the child, parental involvement supports the whole family. "Families do better when parents/carers have the opportunity to work in partnership with professionals to learn more about their child's autism, behaviour

management techniques, and how to teach new skills" (Brereton & Tonge 2005).

With ABA/IBI, some parents choose intense involvement, becoming a therapist for their child. The key for parents who choose this path is training. Indicatively a recent study by the Chicago Children's Clinic found that providing parents with training in established treatments is a necessary component, and sometimes a sufficient component, for children with autism to get better. Parents in the Chicago study received 25 hours of training and in one case only 6 hours learning key skills to help children with autism make significant improvements in verbal and social functioning.

Q: What does parent involvement in an ABA/IBI program typically look like?

A: Running an ABA/IBI program for a child with autism is labour intensive. It requires a significant amount of hours each week to organise your child's therapy schedule, employ and manage therapists, coordinate various meetings

with individual professionals, and organise and attend team meetings.

For a lot of families this 'head honcho' role exists in addition to parenting the ASD child, parenting siblings, and working in paid employment. Some parents make the decision to become a direct part of the child's treatment team by working as a therapist with their own child. While it's not ideal for every parent, it poses a range of benefits as we'll see in the next section.

Q: What are the benefits of parent involvement in their child's ABA/IBI program?

A: The benefits of parental involvement are numerous with both child and parents making the largest gains. With parental involvement the child has substantially greater opportunities for learning. Parents typically spend the greatest amount of time with their child. Thus, a parent (or parents) trained in autism and behaviour intervention are in the advantageous position of being able to maximise their child's learning rate and skill development.

Parental involvement also contributes to generalisation of the child's acquired skills. Generalisation occurs when a child transfers skills taught under specific conditions to environments different to those present when the skill was first taught. Parents are in a prime position to facilitate this process because they spend a significant amount of time with their child across various environments (e.g. home, community, school and leisure activities). An additional benefit of this position lies in the reverse. Parents are readily present to observe behavioural excesses and deficits in diverse environments. This becomes important in a program sense as the parent can provide the Service Provider with critical input about areas requiring additional attention (e.g. desensitisation to sounds, visits to supermarkets and hairdressers).

Q: How would parents of an ASD child feel confident in taking all of this on?

A: The key is training. A number of training opportunities are available to parents or potential therapists. Typically, at the commencement of the child's ABA/IBI program the chosen service provider would

organise a one or two day 'Introduction to ABA' training workshop. The purpose is to train individuals working directly with the child with ASD, as well as introduce the individualised treatment program to staff working directly with the child.

Within the community, organisations such as ABIA (Autism Behavioural Intervention Association) also play a key role in providing training. As a Victorian service provider I always encourage parent/s to undertake the ABIA Level 1 ABA therapist training (as the minimum) – regardless of their intention to become (or not become) a therapist for their child. This training provides foundation-level ABA knowledge which critically covers both theory and practice.

Most importantly, parents learn effective and efficient ways to interact with their ASD child through training. Parents become more knowledgeable about autism in general, and simultaneously acquire skills that specifically aid parent/child communications and interactions.

ABA/IBI training also provides parents with practical strategies to help manage concerning behaviours (e.g.tantrums, meltdowns, etc.). This leads to an increased understanding of the child, which often leads to improved parent/child relations. An improvement in parent/child interaction has significant positive effects for parents, as well as for the child's sense of self and wellbeing.

Training is also important at another level. Knowledge of basic ABA theory increases

parents' confidence in running an ABA/IBI program, communicating with the range of required professionals, and advocating on behalf of their child. With funding changes, and given the movement toward evidence-based treatment methods, knowledge of a child's progress and being able to clearly articulate a child's needs is paramount.

As you can see, the flow-on effects of parental involvement in the child's ABA program have the potential to be life changing for the whole family.

Q: How can families get more information about ABA/IBI?

A: If you are a Victorian resident contact ABIA (info@abia.net.au or 03 9830 0677). ABIA runs Level 1 and Advanced ABA training courses as well as a range of topic-specific workshops for parents and professionals. Many interstate families have travelled to Melbourne to undertake Level 1 (Becoming a Therapist) training. Autism families in other states should contact their autism peak body, or call ABIA for a referral to a service provider in their state.

References

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