

How to Use An ABA Approach to Advocate For Your Special Needs Child

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The Planning and Placement Team (PPT) room...it's an intimidating scene for any parent to enter, stuffy with professionals defined by their never-ending acronyms: OT, PT, BCBA, SLP. Someone hands you your procedural safeguards, a maze of words defining your rights as a parent of a child with special needs. On the table lies a stack of papers, filled with incomprehensible numbers that somehow represent your child's strengths and continued needs. People begin to talk, but the information comes quick. The team, of which you are an integral part, develops a program that represents your child's day, every day, for the next year. Do you have any questions? Are you in agreement? At the center of

this process is your child. And as the parent of this child, your responsibilities have expanded far beyond the typical duties of packing lunch and helping with homework. In addition, you have become your child's advocate, and it is your job to make sure that the "just right" educational program is developed to empower your son or daughter to live the happiest, healthiest, and fullest life possible.

The question then becomes, how do we advocate in the most effective way possible? What do we, as parents, need to do in order to ensure optimal outcomes? Interestingly, although we are quick to consider the relevance of applied behavior analysis (ABA) to our children with special needs, we often forget



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that these same principles prove beneficial to us as advocating adults. In aligning our advocacy practices with the science of ABA, we increase our likelihood of success in navigating the complex PPT process and improve results when working with school teams. By following the steps below, we believe parents can embrace a behavior analytic approach to advocacy, thus achieving socially significant change for their children through collaboration, trust, and science.

1. **Pair yourself with reinforcement before the PPT**

In order to be successful in navigating this complex process, you must develop a strong rapport with the school-based team and keep in mind that “you can catch more bees with honey than with vinegar.” Find a way to make your presence desirable; in pairing yourself with preferred items and activities, whether that be by sending a thank you email, providing refreshments at the meeting, volunteering during a class event, or providing a brief statement of appreciation in passing, you will become someone the school welcomes collaborating with.

2. **Define a measurable, objective goal for the meeting**

How do you know if your goal meets these criteria? You must be able to determine with absolute certainty whether the goal was achieved, and others must be able to do so as well. For example, “I just want my child to be happy,” is not a measurable goal because while the school team may believe that your child is happy, you may disagree; an element of subjectivity exists. How will you know your child is happy? What are the clear, unambiguous indicators? A more objective, measurable goal might be that your child gets invited to at least one playdate a week, participates in at least two extracurricular activities each school

year or completes a self-monitoring rating scale at a predetermined level for 80 percent of school days. Having a measurable, objective goal for your PPT meeting guides the development of an effective action plan and allows you to better reflect upon your successes and continued challenges.

3. **Develop visual supports and cues to follow that align with your goal**

It can be easy to get sidetracked or, in some cases, lose your confidence in a PPT. Develop materials you can reference as needed throughout the meeting that clearly align with your goal. Consider writing yourself a script, preparing an agenda, or outlining a proposed action plan. Access these materials as needed throughout the meeting to prompt yourself (and the team) to stay goal-oriented.

4. **Arrange setting events that set you up for success**

Setting events, as they relate to this topic of discussion, encompass anything done in advance of a PPT that increases the likelihood of your effectively advocating on behalf of your child. In simple terms, be prepared and take care of yourself. It is important to read all the paperwork, annotate your questions, review meeting invitations, and do your research. But it’s also critical that you get a good night’s sleep, have a full stomach, and are ready to tackle the meeting with the best version of yourself—so make sure to take some “you” time, too.

5. **Identify your triggers and know how your behavior changes as a result**

There are bound to be certain events that you find particularly frustrating during the PPT process. For some, this may be a reduction

in services or conflicting teacher reports. For others, statements of blame or lack of data may represent the greatest area of concern. Reflect on your past experiences and identify those moments that have previously turned things for the worse. Then, consider how your own behavior changed as a result and, perhaps most importantly, the effect this had on your overall goal. Did your “defensive, accusatory behavior” increase “collaborative, team-work-oriented behaviors” throughout the team? Or, did it cause others to shut down and thus avoid interactions and communication in the future? In becoming mindful of how your behavior changes in response to your personal triggers in a PPT, you can prepare responses that better align with your goals. Simply put, in changing your own behavior, you have the opportunity to change the behaviors of others.

6. Only use punishment as a last resort option

It may be tempting to reprimand the team, threaten to seek counsel to pursue due process, report a team to their superiors, or engage in any number of other punitive procedures. While doing so may be effective, be wary of the unwanted side effects. In the world of ABA, punishment procedures have been shown to increase anger, aggression, and retaliation, which may have implications for the future. Punishment procedures also harm the rapport building process, yielding damaged relationships in which both parties engage in escape-maintained behaviors, such as avoiding future communication. Lastly, a behavioral contrast effect may occur, meaning that while the team may not engage in certain behaviors in your presence, those same behaviors may occur even more frequently at other times when you are not there. Or the team might replace the behaviors you don't like with novel behaviors that you *really* can't tolerate. While punishment procedures may be the only viable option in some extreme cases, you must consider the potential repercussions in advance and decide if they represent risks you are willing to take.

7. Use shaping principles to reinforce increasingly closer approximations to the end goal

Shaping is the process of providing reinforcement for closer approximations to your goal. In other words, highlight, praise, and demonstrate gratitude for the behaviors that align with what you want to accomplish. For example, if your goal is for team members to respond faster to emails, then you might track how long it took to receive a response in the past and use this information as a baseline or starting point. Any time team members respond more efficiently than baseline level, you could send a reinforcing email, to the effect of, “Thank you for responding so quickly. I really appreciate your time and collaboration.” On the flip side, when the team takes longer to respond, refrain from sending a praise email. Systematically set new benchmarks for responding until you get close to or achieve your desired response time. Keep in mind this should be realistic. If your goal is for team members to respond within an hour of receiving your email, that is unlikely to happen as staff are likely teaching, in meetings, or engaging in other school-related duties. However, a response time goal of 24-48 hours is significantly more attainable.

8. Reflect on your effectiveness

Spend some time identifying what is working and helping you move closer to your goals and what is impeding progress. Identify where you can make a change to improve the overall effectiveness of your strategies. Keep in mind that any change you make will take time to show its effects, so you must apply it consistently, observe patiently, and assess whether it's moving you in your desired direction.

9. Identify and reinforce one good outcome

Even if most of the meeting didn't go the way you had hoped, find one good thing and praise it. Dig deep if you have to. Did the team let you share your concerns? Did they provide you with reports in advance? Did they stay lat-

er than the scheduled time to address all your agenda items? These little behaviors matter. Thank the team for the positive actions you observed, no matter how small, and reiterate your appreciation for them again in follow up. If you are consistent in this, those small positive changes will start happening more often over time. If you don't, behavioral theory indicates that they probably will not happen again.

10. Follow up in writing to clarify any questions you have

Within five business days, you will receive a copy of your child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP), detailing conversations and decisions made at the PPT meeting. Don't be afraid to ask questions; the lingo in these documents can be technical and confusing. But being able to decipher the meaning behind the terminology is critical. Requests for clarification in writing not only provide ongoing documentation but also serve as time capsules that you can refer back to in moments of confusion. What did the speech provider say you should practice with your child at home? How many points did your child need to earn his "home reward?" What changes in schedule should you be prepping him/her for in the coming weeks? You are not expected to memorize this information. However, you may find it useful to get clarification in permanent product form that can be used as a guide when things get muddy in the future.

11. Find a way to monitor progress and analyze the completion of tasks

Every PPT meeting should conclude with the development of an action plan. What are the next steps? What is the team going to implement and what should you, as a parent, do to support on the "home front?" These items should be broken down into concrete objectives, with set start and end dates, and identified responsible parties. From there, determine how you are going to work with the team to monitor progress on these items. Will there be monthly team meetings to check in? Will the team be sending bi-weekly email up-

dates? Will progress be recorded in a log of some kind? Accountability is ensured when we develop meaningful systems for monitoring progress on action plans. Don't forget to include yourself in this action plan; set goals and deadlines for yourself that address your previously defined end goal.

As you develop your advocacy practice in accordance with the principles of ABA, as outlined in this article, keep in mind that socially significant, meaningful behavior change takes time. It is likely that the undesired behaviors you are trying to change took time to develop. Therefore, it will also take time to undo or replace them. Consider a more "real life" example of an individual who gained sixty pounds over the course of the year and now wants to shed that extra weight. It is unrealistic to set a goal of shedding all that weight in one week if it took a year to gain. In order for a positive change to occur and maintain, strategies must be applied repeatedly and consistently over time. Don't get discouraged if you don't see immediate, monumental change. Remain patient and optimistic that all your hard work will pay off, and acknowledge the small changes along the way. In the end, all the small changes equate to the big change you are targeting. ABA is scientifically proven to work, so applying it consistently will prove effective over time.

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