



My ABA story – Mia

Mia is now nearly 14 years old. She cannot speak, is epileptic and autistic with severe learning difficulties and she injures herself for both sensory and other reasons.

Mia was a thriving baby for four months then she started to become “detached” from us. Mia wasn’t interested in play; she didn’t laugh or smile and also seemed to be in severe pain, having spasms and crying.

An EEG showed Mia was having **infantile epileptic seizures**. Once Mia was diagnosed with epilepsy and it was brought under control, she started to respond to us again and eventually smiled - she hadn’t done that in a long time, it was quite emotional for us.

Mia was formally **diagnosed with autism** when she was three and a half years old.

Mia couldn’t walk and would shuffle around on her bottom, but she attended a nursery, which accepted SEN children, and had one to one support every weekday afternoon from two and half up to the age of five. She had to spend time in a standing frame every day at nursery and home until the muscles in her legs developed enough for her support her own weight. **Mia started to walk at the age of three and a half.**

We soon realised Mia was not progressing at the nursery; not interacting with the other children or adults; not making any vocalisations; not playing independently and she started to self-injure by hitting her front teeth on her knees; banging her forehead on her knees and punching her forehead. I would stand outside the window at pick-up time watching her do this while the TAs busied themselves getting the other children ready for home. Her frustration and distress were palpable – I felt so helpless watching and not being able to alert the staff to her distress. The staff were kind and friendly, but not trained or able to help in any way with this kind of behaviour.

We were told about the ABA/VB (Applied Behaviour Analysis/Verbal Behaviour) educational approach and we decided to try and see if it could reach Mia as she was now self-injuring as self-stimulation and because of frustration at not being able to communicate her needs to anyone. We started a ABA/VB home programme with 2 tutors for 3 hours every weekday morning from January 2010. The results were amazing, **within weeks we saw Mia start to improve in all areas.** She gave eye contact and started to interact with her tutors.

With Mia in her ABA home programme in the morning and at nursery in the afternoon we began to realise that the ABA/VB was the only way Mia could be taught successfully. In the morning with the ABA tutor Mia would be smiling, happy and engaged. At the nursery in the afternoon she would soon become distressed and start self-injuring, sometimes drawing blood before anyone intervened.

We were told about an ABA/VB school and took Mia for an assessment. She was accepted and we started the process of getting the placement approved by Lambeth LEA. After much correspondence and finally a tribunal, **Mia started at the Rainbow School (part of BeyondAutism) in April 2011** where she has a 1:1 tutor all day. The 1:1 tutor not only kept Mia in line with her individualised education plan, but also dealt with blocking inappropriate behaviour as and when it happened, so the flow of teaching is not interrupted.

Mia now loves going to her school; she likes all her tutors, her SaLT and OT therapists. Her progress at the school has been astonishing.

She has developed a personality with strong likes and dislikes. She now tolerates group sessions; assembly and being around other children. She enjoys the table sessions for her lessons; ITT; going to the school library; swimming; yoga; going to the park and shops, bouncing on her exercise ball; pushing toys with buttons that play tunes or talk; music and musical instruments especially keyboards. She has made amazing progress at her school through the dedicated 1:1 tutors using ABA/VB. She is vocal, giggly and happy, which brings joy to us every day.

Mia can now sign for 20 items using Makaton signs; engages in finger pointing to choose things she would like and will lead a person by the hand to go where she wants to go and to do things for her e.g. turn on a toy. She has also been taught how to refuse, be it people, activities, food etc by gently using a pushing away action with her hand.

Mia still sometimes self-injures by scratching herself; punching her thighs and feet; biting her hands, but where this was once the norm, it is now just she feels frustration at not being able to tell someone she is feeling a seizure coming on or is still recovering from a seizure.

Every day we see improvements in Mia, because of ABA/VB. It was a lifeline thrown to us when we needed it and we are so glad we grabbed it. I dread to think how Mia would be now without this intervention.

This educational approach will not work with everyone, but for those it does help it's a key that opens a door. ABA/VB should be included and recognised as being one of the many ways autistic children can be helped and educated.