

Our ABA Journey



Our son is Liam and he is 12. He was diagnosed officially with autism at the age of three, although we knew beforehand that he was going to need extra help because we have an older son and Liam just wasn't reaching the usual milestones in time — for example, he is non-verbal and has never spoken a word.

Our ABA journey began relatively late in Liam's childhood; we started ABA just before he turned seven. So Liam is proof that ABA can work for older people and it is not necessary to start it in the Early Years to see results.

So why did we come so late to the ABA table? Well, quite simply we were following the typical path of the UK special needs education like good little lemmings are told to. Liam had started at age two and a half at a nursery for autistic children. He then went on to a special school — a highly praised and sought-after Local Authority school for autistic children. Indeed, at the time, we considered ourselves lucky to get a place.

However, by age six we were starting to question whether Liam was making any educational progress. We understood that he learnt things slowly, but we began to wonder whether he was really in the right setting.

His Speech and Language Report prepared for his Annual Review in 2014 stated the following: *“The ASD strategies used within the school have had limited success. His response to the input he has received has been limited. It continues to be extremely challenging to find things that motivate Liam and*

this impacts further on his lack of joint attention. Liam's levels of participation and engagement to even the most basic activities continue to be problematic. His capacity for learning communication skills continues to be limited and therefore sign and symbol use has been largely unsuccessful to date."

On receiving this soul-destroying report, I (his mother) arranged to meet with the Speech and Language Therapist who confirmed that she had tried what she could to teach him, but he was just not interested in learning, and, in fact, he had no desire to communicate. It was like Liam was being blamed and the school had given up. At the Annual Review meeting, it was proposed that I start looking for another school for Liam, one for children with Severe Learning Difficulties.

However, I had decided that I was NOT going to give up on my child (who by the way is diagnosed with Moderate Learning Difficulties, not Severe Learning Difficulties). I knew that it was NOT, as the therapist had said, *"extremely challenging to find things that motivate Liam"*. This was just a code word for *"I'm not doing my job properly"*.

Researching motivation on the internet, I came across ABA and read up on it. I had heard about ABA previously when Liam was first diagnosed, but the head teacher of Liam's nursery and his educational psychologist at the time were very much against it. This time, however, I decided to give it a go — in fact throw everything 100% into it, because we were at the last chance saloon stage, so why not? The school had already tried TEACCH, SCERTS, PECS and Makaton without progress. I wanted to give ABA the best chance of success and this meant doing it properly: employing the services of a Board Certified Behaviour Analyst (BCBA) and completing multiple courses in ABA myself so that I would know how it worked.

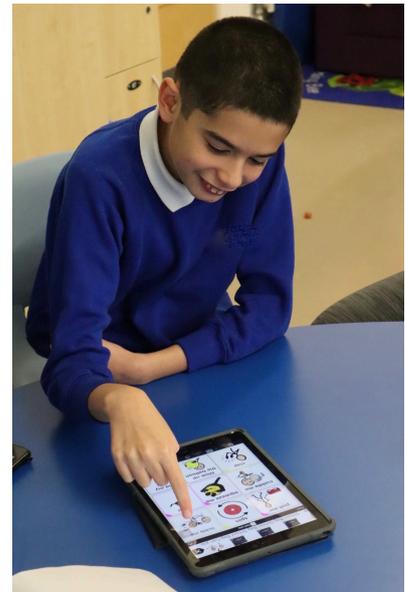
I became my son's ABA tutor, teaching him after school every day for approximately one hour. I was guided by our BCBA, who I sent video clips and data sheets to and who visited us regularly to watch Liam learn and to feed back advice. I chose to teach my son things that I knew his school were not working on — in fact I would go over and above what they were doing. They would say he had learnt three colours — so I taught him 10. They would say he could match six pictures of Thomas the Tank Engine — I could get him to match 20 everyday objects from around the home, such as toothbrush, spoon, bath, biscuit etc, far more useful than a kids TV/book character.

Where the school had said they had made no progress in teaching Liam sign language, I was able to teach Liam three Makaton signs and he was able to use them independently to request things he wanted. And he was able to do this not just with me, but with family members and even people he'd just met.

At the next Annual Review, the headteacher even commented that whatever we were doing at home had worked wonders — and now it was suggested that there was no need to look for an alternative school. Of course, now we knew that his progress had been a direct result of the ABA teaching — and we had a year's worth of video clips and data sheets to prove it. There was no way we were going to let our son continue at that school. ABA school was the way to go! And so, armed with our reams of evidence, we won our tribunal to get Liam a place.

Liam started at his ABA school in September 2015, aged eight. Through the school, he has learnt how to communicate by using around 35 Makaton signs and now uses an iPad app to speak phrases such as "*Let's go*

swimming”, “*Can you tickle me?*”, “*I want cheese*” and “*I want to go to bed*”. He has learnt how to select the word “*go*” when he is in an environment where he is anxious, such as when there is a person who has challenging behaviour or when he is in a room that is too crowded. He can press the word “*finished*” to say that he would like to take a break from work or to indicate that he has had enough food at mealtimes.



Adults can also use Liam’s iPad to tell him the plans for the day, such as travelling in the car to go to the dentist or the supermarket.

Before ABA, whenever Liam was trying to communicate his needs he would get frustrated if people didn’t understand — he would screech and flop to the floor, hit himself or occasionally pinch and head-butt.

When I meet people who are anti-ABA and spout myths such as “*it’s abusive*”, “*it’s trying to force people to do behaviours they don’t want to do*” and “*it’s trying to make people conform and take away their autism*”, I often find these people simply don’t want to listen to an alternative viewpoint and seem to have these myths tattooed on their brains.

As with any educational therapy or programme, you get good and bad practitioners. I am aware there are bad ABA programmes — however, I don’t agree that if you have experienced a bad programme that gives you the right to rubbish everyone else’s programme. Any type of education can be dull, repetitive, frustrating and seem pointless — just ask any teenager from mainstream!

However, we do need to teach people key skills such as how to cross the road safely, how to choose the right clothes to wear according to the weather and why you can't steal chips from a stranger's plate. This is not trying to take away someone's autism. These are simple concepts that are just innate to the majority of people, but some people need help to learn these things for their own safety, the safety of others and generally to make progress in life.

Our son's ABA programme has never involved abuse or punishment. He has never had to be restrained, excluded or kept in solitary confinement. What I would say is abusive would be to NOT have taken the journey we have taken — to agree that our son was not able to learn to communicate and to have done nothing and left him to languish in that poor-quality school where his behaviour would have most probably become more challenging. That would have been denying him the right to learn how to communicate, how to keep himself safe, how to gain independence skills and how to use his iPad to make choices. We are not making him conform — in fact, through ABA, we are giving him more freedom and the chance at a more fulfilling life.