



Applied behavior analysis medical necessity guide

Note: If there is a discrepancy between this guideline and a member's plan of benefits, the benefits plan will govern. Also, a state or federal government, or CMS for Medicare and Medicaid members,¹ may mandate some coverage (and coverage limits).

Purpose

This applied behavior analysis (ABA) guideline is for use by clinicians. It's meant to aid in the decision-making process to determine the type and intensity of services a member with a condition on the Autism Spectrum needs. If the treatment is provided in an inpatient, residential or partial hospitalization setting, applicable medical necessity for coverage at that level of care is used and specific authorization for ABA is not needed in addition. Reviews using other applicable medical necessity criteria occur at a frequency commensurate with the level of care. Prior to discharge from one of these higher levels of care, a review using the guideline below for medical necessity of ABA is needed.

Guideline development

These guidelines come from extensive review of the literature on the use of applied behavior analysis to treat Autism Spectrum Disorder and a comparative review of the guidelines of other health insurers. A multidisciplinary committee of health care professionals within and external to Aetna Behavioral Health developed and approved the guidelines based on these reviews. The guidelines are based upon the reviews and known best practices in the treatment of Autism Spectrum Disorder, including:

- The requirement for a complete assessment using validated tools and standardized developmental norms
- Focused interventions
- Caregiver participation
- Repeated measurement with standardized measures to assess progress

Philosophy

Applied behavior analysis is a scientifically supported model of treatment to remediate the functional impairments typically found in people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). It is a time-limited treatment that should result in progressive, measurable gains in functioning on a standardized measure.

¹Exhibit A, attached to this guide, addresses medical necessity review for plans in Maryland subject to the law of the state. Other state laws and regulations may apply in other states.

Type, duration and intensity

ABA intervention type	Definition	Typical age range	Typical intensity	Typical duration
Comprehensive	Skills and behaviors in multiple affected domains are targeted for treatment, which often include maladaptive behaviors.	0-7 years	10-25 hrs/week	1-2 years
Focused	Services are directed to a limited number of skill and behavioral targets.	All ages	1-20 hrs/week	Variable 1-4 years

Essential elements

1. There is a DSM-V diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ICD-10: F84.0; F84.3 – F84.9) obtained by an appropriate provider (i.e. licensed psychologist/psychiatrist, physician, or other health care professional qualified to diagnose mental health conditions within their scope of practice).
2. There are identifiable target behaviors having an impact so the member cannot adequately participate in developmentally appropriate activities such as school. Or there may be a significant risk of harm to self or others. The ABA is not custodial in nature (which Aetna defines as care provided when the member “has reached the maximum level of physical or mental function and such person is not likely to make further significant improvement” or “any type of care where the primary purpose of the type of care provided is to attend to the member’s daily living activities which do not entail or require the continuing attention of trained medical or paramedical personnel.”) Plan documents may have variations on this definition and need to be reviewed.
3. There is engagement and commitment from parent(s) (or guardians) to participate in treatment to generalize gains.
4. There is a time-limited, individualized treatment plan developed that is member-centric, strengths-specific, family-focused, community-based, multi-system, culturally competent, and least intrusive. This treatment plan has specific target behaviors that are clearly defined: frequency, rate, symptom intensity or duration, or other objective measures of baseline levels are recorded, and quantifiable criteria for progress are established. The plan describes behavioral intervention techniques appropriate to the target behavior, reinforcers selected, and strategies for generalization of learned skills are specified. And there is documentation of planning for transition through the continuum of interventions, services and settings, as well as titration and discharge criteria.
5. There is a review of the member’s history, as well as ongoing collaboration and coordination with existing providers and/or the school district, as applicable. There is involvement of, or referrals to, appropriate health care, community or supplemental resources.
6. Services must be provided directly or billed by: licensed behavior analysts (in states with behavior analyst licensure laws), board-certified behavior analysts, or licensed psychologists where behavior analysis is within their scope of practice definition, unless state mandates, plan

documents or contracts require otherwise. If state mandates, plan documents or contracts allow authorization for services that are not directly provided by individuals licensed by the state or certified by the Behavior Analyst Certification Board as noted above, there must be supervision and direction of the unlicensed or non-certified providers in line with practice standards, unless state mandates, plan documents or contracts require otherwise.

Medical necessity criteria to initiate applied behavior analysis

All the following criteria must be met:

1. Essential elements are met.
2. There is demonstration of functional impairment on a standardized scale of functioning in the past 12 months. For instance, the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales 3 (VABS-3), the Adaptive Behavior Assessment Scale (ABAS), VB-MAPP or ABLLS. The impairment must be at least one standard deviation below the population mean OR represent a significant risk of harm to self or others.
3. Parent(s) (or guardians) will be provided necessary support and training to reinforce interventions and generalize gains.
4. The level of impairment (calculated below) justifies the number of hours requested.

Assessment of symptom severity (This can be used as a guide.)				
	None <1 SD below	Mild >1 SD below	Moderate >1.5 SD below	Severe >2 SD below
Functional impairment	0 Hours/Wk	1 to 4 Hours/Wk	4 to 7 Hours/Wk	7 to 10 Hours/Wk
Maladaptive behavior: aggression, self-injury, property destruction, restrictive/repetitive behaviors and interests; abnormal, inflexible or intense preoccupations				
Social communication: Problems with expressive or receptive language, poor understanding or use of non-verbal communications, stereotyped or repetitive language, lack of social/emotional reciprocity, failure to seek or develop shared social activities				
Self-care: Difficulty recognizing danger/risks, or advocating for self; problems with grooming/eating/toileting skills which are impeded by symptoms of Autism				
Based on functional impairment and assessment of symptom severity, additional authorization may be provided for QHP protocol modification and direction at 1 to 2 hours per 10 hours of treatment by protocol, as well as authorization for caregiver training.				

All four criteria above must be evaluated. Based on scientific literature and the Aetna clinician’s judgment following their review, the initial authorization may be for up to 30 hours per week for Comprehensive ABA intervention of less than 2 years, or up to 25 hours per week for Focused ABA intervention, up to 6 consecutive months, unless state mandates dictate otherwise, or there is sufficient

clinical support for more hours. Further clinical review (by a medical director or clinical consultant) may be sought for requests for more hours than are supported by the available clinical information.

Medical necessity criteria to continue applied behavior analysis

All the following criteria must be met:

1. Essential elements are still met.
2. Re-evaluation of interventions and progress has been performed (every six months) to assess the need for ongoing ABA; AND a repeated validated assessment (e.g., Vineland, ABAS, VB-MAPP or ABLLS) has been done every 6-12 months to demonstrate response to intervention.
3. The frequency of the target behavior has improved since the last review, or if not, there has been modification of the treatment, additional assessments have been conducted, and/or there has been appropriate consultations from other staff or experts.
4. Parent(s) (or guardians) will have measurable goals that work to reinforce interventions and generalize gains across multiple settings and allow progress to be maintained over time as the treating professional fades out.
5. The treatment plan documents a gradual tapering of higher intensities of intervention and a shifting to supports from other sources (school, as an example) as progress occurs.
6. The level of impairment (calculated using the Assessment of Symptom Severity above) justifies the number of hours requested for ABA.

All six criteria above must be evaluated. Based on scientific literature and the Aetna clinician's judgment following their review of treatment progress and response to intervention, the continued authorization is adjusted (up or down) based on clinical justification or may be continued for up to 30 hours per week for Comprehensive ABA intervention of less than 2 years, or up to 25 hours per week for Focused ABA intervention, up to 6 consecutive months, unless state mandates dictate otherwise, or there is sufficient clinical support for more hours. Further clinical review (by a medical director or clinical consultant) may be sought for requests for more hours than are supported by the available clinical information.

Termination of applied behavior analysis

Termination: A member's progress is to be evaluated every six months. A member not making progress will be transitioned to other appropriate services. When it becomes clear that a treatment is ineffective, or the treatment is no longer needed, this must be communicated to the family and provider.

One of the following criteria must be met:

1. The essential elements are no longer met.
2. There has been improvement of two or more standard deviations in multiple domains.
3. There has been improvement of one or more standard deviations in multiple domains in a Focused ABA Intervention plan.
4. There has been improvement of less than one standard deviation in all domains for successive authorization periods.
5. Parent(s) (or guardians) have not participated in treatment for successive authorization periods.

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Exhibit A: Medical necessity review for Maryland plans

Pursuant to Maryland insurance regulation COMAR 31.10.39, Aetna will apply the following criteria when assessing medical necessity for applied behavior analysis for plans subject to Maryland law.

1. The child's primary care provider or specialty physician must perform a comprehensive evaluation identifying the need for applied behavior analysis for the treatment of Autism or Autism Spectrum Disorder.
2. Such primary care provider or specialty physician must prescribe the treatment. Such prescription must include specific treatment goals.
3. Such treatment shall be reviewed annually for medical necessity with the primary care provider or specialty physician, and in consultation with the applied behavior analysis provider. Such utilization review shall include:
 - a. Documentation of benefit to the child
 - b. Identification of new or continuing treatment goals
 - c. Development of a new or continuing treatment plan
4. The applied behavior analysis provider must be licensed, certified or otherwise authorized under the Maryland Health Occupations Article or similar licensing, certification or authorization requirements of another state or U.S. territory where the services are provided.
5. Coverage may be subject to limitations in a health benefit plan relating to coordination of benefits, participating provider requirements, restrictions on services provided by family or household members, case management provisions, and copayments, coinsurance and deductible amounts.

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German	Um auf den für Sie kostenlosen Sprachservice auf Deutsch zuzugreifen, rufen Sie die Nummer auf Ihrer ID-Karte an.
Greek	Για πρόσβαση στις υπηρεσίες γλώσσας χωρίς χρέωση, καλέστε τον αριθμό στην κάρτα ασφάλισής σας.
Gujarati	તમારે કોઈ પણ જાતના ખર્ચ વિના ભાષા સેવાઓ મેળવવા માટે, તમારા આઈડી કાર્ડ પર રહેલ નંબર પર કોલ કરવો.
Hawaiian	No ka wala'au 'ana me ka lawelawe 'ōlelo e kahea aku i ka helu kelepona ma kāu kāleka ID. Kāki 'ole 'ia kēia kōkua nei.
Hindi	बिना किसी कीमत के भाषा सेवाओं का उपयोग करने के लिए, अपने आईडी कार्ड पर दिए नंबर पर कॉल करें।
Hmong	Yuav kom tau kev pab txhais lus tsis muaj nqi them rau koj, hu tus naj npawb ntawm koj daim npav ID.
Igbo	Inweta enyemaka asụsụ na akwughi ụgwọ obụla, kpọọ nọmba nọ na kaadi njirimara gị!
Ilocano	Tapno maakses dagiti serbisio ti pagsasao nga awanan ti bayadna, awagan ti numero nga adda ayan ti ID kardmo.
Indonesian	Untuk mengakses layanan bahasa tanpa dikenakan biaya, silakan hubungi nomor telepon di kartu asuransi Anda.
Italian	Per accedere ai servizi linguistici senza alcun costo per lei, chiami il numero sulla tessera identificativa.
Japanese	無料の言語サービスは、IDカードにある番号にお電話ください。
Karen	vXw>urRM>usdmw>rRpXRtw>zH;w>rRwz. vXwtd.'D;tyShRvXeub.[h.tDRt*D><ud;b.vDwJpdeD.*H>vXtttd.vXecd.*DR A (ID) tvDRM.wuh>l
Korean	무료 다국어 서비스를 이용하려면 보험 ID 카드에 수록된 번호로 전화해 주십시오.
Kru-Bassa	I nyuu kosna mahola ni language services ngui nsaa wogui wo, sebel i nsinga i ye ntilga i kat yong matibla
Kurdish	بو دهسپێر اگه‌یشتن به خزمه‌تگوزاری زمان به‌ی تێچوون بو تو، په‌یوه‌ندی بکه به ژماره‌ی سه‌ر ئای دی (ID) کارتی خۆت.
Lao	ເພື່ອຂໍ້າຖົງບໍ່ວິກາງພາສາທີ່ບໍ່ສອຄ່າ, ໃຫ້ໃບທາດປີໃບຢູ່ໃນບັດປະຈຳຕົວຂອງທ່ານ.
Marathi	आपल्याला कोणत्याही शुल्काशिवाय भाषा सेवांपर्यंत पोहोचण्यासाठी, आपल्या ID कार्डावरील क्रमांकावर फोन करा.
Marshallese	Ñan bōk jipañ kōn kajin ilo an ejjelōk wōñean ñan kwe, kwōn kallok nōmba eo ilo kaat in ID eo am.
Micronesian-Ponapean	Pwehn alehdi sawas en lokaia kan ni sohte pweipwei, koahlih nempe nan amhw doaropwe en ID.
Mon-Khmer, Cambodian	ដើម្បីទទួលបានសេវាកម្មភាសាដែលឥតគិតថ្លៃសម្រាប់លោកអ្នក សូមហៅទូរសព្ទទៅកាន់លេខដែលមាននៅលើប័ណ្ណសម្គាល់ខ្លួនរបស់លោកអ្នក។
Navajo	T'11 ni nizaad k'ehj7 bee n7k1 a'doowo[doo b33h 7l7n7g00 naaltsoos bee atah n7l98go nanitin7g77 bee n44ho'd0lzin7g77 b44sh bee hane'7 bik1'7g77 1aj8' h0lne'.
Nepali	भाषासम्बन्धी सेवाहरूमाथि निःशुल्क पहुँच राख्न आफ्नो कार्डमा रहेको नम्बरमा कल गर्नुहोस्।
Nilotic-Dinka	Të koor yin ran de wëër de thokic ke cìn wëu kor keek tēnɔŋ yin. Ke yin cɔl ran ye koc kuony në namba de abac tō në ID kard duön de tiit de nyin de panakim köu.
Norwegian	For tilgang til kostnadsfri språktjenester, ring nummeret på ID-kortet ditt.

