

Reducing Challenging Behaviors Using ABA:

A Practical Guide for Parents





Introduction

When Behavior Feels Hard

Many families experience moments where challenging behaviors take over the day. Tantrums, screaming, throwing objects, or refusal can feel overwhelming, especially when they happen often or without warning. Parents may feel unsure about what their child is trying to communicate or how to respond in a helpful way.

The encouraging news is that behavior has meaning. From an ABA perspective, challenging behavior is not random or intentional misbehavior. It is a form of communication. When we understand why a behavior is happening, we can respond in ways that reduce stress and help our child learn safer and more effective skills.

This guide offers gentle, practical ABA informed strategies to help parents understand and reduce challenging behaviors at home.





Why Challenging Behaviors Happen

Children use behavior to communicate when other skills are still developing. From an ABA lens, behavior serves a purpose. It helps the child get something they need or avoid something that feels difficult.

Challenging behaviors may happen when a child:

- cannot express needs clearly
- feels overwhelmed or overstimulated
- wants attention or connection
- is trying to escape a task or transition
- does not yet have an alternative skill

ABA therapy focuses on identifying the purpose of behavior and teaching replacement skills that meet the same need in a safer and more appropriate way.



Understanding Behavior Through an ABA Lens

In ABA, behavior is often understood by looking at what happens before and after it occurs.

The behavior

This could be crying, hitting, dropping to the floor, or refusal.

Before the behavior

This may include a demand, transition, noise, or change in routine.



After the behavior

Something changes. A task stops, attention is given, or an item is provided.



When a behavior consistently leads to a certain outcome, it is more likely to happen again. ABA helps parents change what happens after the behavior so that new and more helpful skills can develop.



The Behavior Support Toolkit

These tools are commonly used in ABA therapy and can be practiced at home in small, consistent ways.

Tool	How You Can Use It	Why It Helps
Clear expectations	Use simple language or visuals to show what is expected	Reduces confusion and anxiety
Visual supports	Use First Then cards or simple schedules	Makes routines predictable
Choice making	Offer two appropriate options	Gives a sense of control
Replacement skills	Teach what to do instead of the behavior	Meets the same need safely
Consistent reinforcement	Praise and reward appropriate behavior right away	Encourages positive behavior

You do not need to use every tool at once. Starting with one can already make a difference.



Everyday Situations and How ABA Can Help

Transitions

Why transitions are hard

Moving from one activity to another can feel sudden and stressful.

Practical steps

Step 1

Give a short warning such as "Two more minutes."

Step 2

Use a visual or timer to show when the change is coming.

Step 3

Reinforce calm behavior during the transition.

Encouragement

Even one smoother transition a day is progress.





Task Refusal

Why refusal happens

Tasks may feel too hard, too long, or unclear.

Practical steps

Step 1

Break the task into smaller steps.

Step 2

Pair effort with motivation such as “First work, then play.”

Step 3

Praise attempts, not just completion.

Encouragement

Trying is a skill worth reinforcing.

Attention Seeking Behavior

Why it happens

Children need connection and may use behavior to get it.

Practical steps

Step 1

Provide attention regularly during calm moments.

Step 2

Teach appropriate ways to ask for attention.

Step 3

Reinforce positive bids for connection.

Encouragement

Connection before correction supports long term progress.



Replacing Behavior With New Skills

ABA focuses on teaching what to do instead of what not to do.

Challenging Behavior	What the Child May Need	Replacement Skill
Screaming	Attention or help	Asking or tapping
Throwing items	Escape or break	Saying " break "
Hitting	Communication or control	Using words or visuals
Dropping to the floor	Time or predictability	Using a timer or choice

Teaching and reinforcing replacement skills consistently helps reduce challenging behavior over time.





Sensory Supports That Can Reduce Behavior

Some behaviors increase when a child feels overwhelmed. Gentle sensory supports can help regulate the body and support calmer behavior.

You can try:

- quiet background sounds
- movement breaks
- soft lighting
- comfortable clothing or fidgets

Supporting regulation makes learning new skills easier.



Tracking Small Wins

Behavior change often happens gradually. Noticing small improvements can help parents stay encouraged.

Examples of progress include:

- shorter tantrums
- faster recovery after frustration
- fewer aggressive moments
- use of a replacement skill

A simple weekly tracker can help:

DAY	Used Replacement Skill	Fewer Behaviors	Parent Gave Praise
Mon	✓	✗	✓
Tue	✓	✓	✓
Wed	✗	✓	✓
Thur	✓	✓	✗
Fri	✓	✓	✓

Each mark helps you notice patterns and progress.



Printable Workbook

1. Common Challenging Behaviors

Write down behaviors you see most often.

2. What Might My Child Need

Circle what seems most likely.

Attention

Help

Break

Control

Sensory support

3. Replacement Skill to Practice

What we will teach instead:

4. Daily Check In

DAY	Replacement Tried	Parent Stayed Calm	Child Recovered Faster
Mon			
Tue			
Wed			
Thur			
Fri			

5. Parent Reflection

One thing that went well today:

One thing to try tomorrow:

Why Choose StarRise ABA?

Choosing the right ABA therapy provider for your child is an important decision. At **StarRise ABA**, we are committed to delivering high-quality, personalized care that meets the unique needs of each child and family.



Personalized Approach

Our therapy programs are designed around your child's goals and strengths, ensuring compassionate and effective care.



Comprehensive Care

We combine one-on-one therapy, social skills training, parent support, and school consultation to create lasting growth.



Convenience and Comfort

We bring professional, in-home ABA therapy to help your child practice skills in familiar environments.





Our team of experienced therapists believes in gentle guidance, practical tools, and partnership with parents.

Together, we help children thrive

in their own way and at their own pace.



Monday – Friday, 7 AM – 5 PM

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