

## GENERAL QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN HIRING A BEHAVIOUR THERAPIST

Below are some general questions to ask potential therapists, this list is not exhaustive but can be used as a jumping off point during discussions with potential therapists.

### *What is the therapist's educational background?*

Therapists who design or supervise programs/interventions should have formal, academic training in ABA (Applied Behaviour Analysis). Look for therapists who are BCBA's (Board Certified Behaviour Analysts) or BCaBA's (Board Certified Assistant Behaviour Analysts). To obtain these credentials, a BCBA must have completed a master's degree, coursework in ABA, an intensive practicum, and passed a board exam. A BCaBA must have an undergraduate degree, coursework in ABA, a practicum, and passed a board exam. BCaBA's must also receive ongoing supervision from a BCBA. Note, behaviour therapists are not regulated in Canada, so individuals without certification can refer to themselves as Senior Therapists, Clinical Supervisors, Behaviour Consultants, etc. as well. If you cannot find a BCBA or BCaBA where you live, look for supervising therapists who have a similar academic background and a BCBA who may be willing to consult to them through telecommunication. A licensed psychologist with training and experience in ABA can also design and supervise programs/interventions.

Therapists who implement programs only, may also have formal academic training. Typically, this is a college certificate in ABA or Behavioural Science. You may come across a therapist who is a RBT (Registered Behaviour Technician). This is a new certification from the Behaviour Analyst Certification Board and requires 40 hours of training in ABA and passing an exam. If the therapist who will implement programming does not have a formal educational background, but the supervising therapist does and can provide training and regular supervision that is usually okay.

### *What experience does the therapist have?*

Ask the therapist about the population they have worked with previously. A therapist should have experience working with a child that is similar in age to your child. The therapist should also have experience working on similar goals to your child's.

If the therapist does not have experience with individuals similar to your child, they should be able to discuss with you how their plan of action. Typically this involves reviewing literature and/or speaking to other behaviour therapists or professionals who have the experience.

### *What assessments does the therapist use?*

The therapist should be able to discuss how they will assess your child. Depending on what your goals/concerns are, the therapist may discuss conducting one or more of the following:

- VB-MAPP or ABLLS-R– these assessments will be used if you are looking for a therapist to design an intensive or comprehensive therapy curriculum for your child where a therapist will work 1:1 with you them. These assessments act a curriculum guide and should be completed every six months. The time it takes to complete one of these assessments varies depending on the child but generally ranges between 2-10 hours.

- Functional Behaviour Assessment (FBA) – this is an umbrella term that includes a variety of assessments that are used to determine why a specific behaviour is or is not happening. Therapists may discuss any of the following as part of a FBA:
  - Observation of your child in the environment where the behaviour occurs
  - Asking you to collect descriptive data to analyze
  - Conduct interviews with you, your child’s caregivers, or others involved in their care
  - Functional Analysis (FA) – This refers to an experimental behaviour assessment where the therapist sets up different situations to see when your child engages in challenging behaviour and when the behaviour stops. This is shown in research as the most effective way to determine the function of a behaviour (i.e., why a behaviour is happening).

**Goals should be set only after an assessment has occurred.**

***Does the therapist include parent/caregiver training as part of their sessions?***

It is important that parents and primary caregivers receive training on the strategies that are used with their children. Other family members (siblings, grandparents, etc.) may also benefit from training. The more consistent everyone is, the more likely a child is to progress. Look for therapists who are comfortable in encouraging parents and caregivers to participate as much as possible, including participating within the actual therapy sessions! Therapists should also discuss ways that training can be provided to you and others.

***How will the therapist track and show me progress?***

Therapists should have a data collection system in place to assess how your child is progressing in their treatment whether you are focusing on teaching new skills, reducing challenging behaviours, or both. There are many ways to collect data, but in general, the therapist should identify that they will collect, summarize (usually by being graphed) and analyze data regularly. You should have access to any data and graphs and the therapist should be able to discuss progress, or lack of progress with you on a regular basis or upon request.

***What if my child doesn’t make progress?***

The exact steps a therapist may follow varies depending on the situation, but they should be able to discuss how they would generally handle a lack of progress. Therapists should mention things like analyzing the data, speaking to the caregivers or other therapists who implement the program, and/or observing the child to assess why progress is not being made. Therapists should then discuss that they would make changes as appropriate to the intervention and/or monitor the intervention more closely and see how it progresses. It is important to know that ABA should never take place over long periods of time without progress being made. It is the therapist’s responsibility to make adjustments to programs to make progress or provide you with recommendations for other services that may be more beneficial to your child.

***What written documentation will the therapist provide?***

This will depend on your goals and needs, but a therapist should provide you with written documentation of the programs or strategies. Sometimes families want letters or summary reports, so if you think you might, make sure to ask about these.

### ***What availability does the therapist have?***

Make sure the therapist is available when you need them to be. If you want therapy to occur on the weekends, but your therapist can never see your child during the weekends, it will be difficult to supervise the program. Similarly, if your goal is to make morning routines run more smoothly, your therapist needs to be available some mornings. Sometimes families and therapists are able to work out alternative solutions such as using videos or occasionally rearranging schedules.

### ***What are the therapist's fees?***

Ask the therapist what their hourly rate is and what is included in that hourly rate. On average, a Clinical Supervisor/Senior Therapist/Behaviour Consultant will charge between \$120-\$150 per hour, and licensed psychologists typically charge around \$200 per hour. Therapists who work with your child directly for multiple hours per week and are supervised by a senior clinician will charge between \$20-35 per hour. Some centres charge a higher flat rate (e.g., \$55 per hour) that includes the senior clinician's rate. Ask about the therapist's fee structure and if there are additional fees for assessments, reports, or anything else.

It is a good idea to be honest and up front with the supervising therapist about your budget. Knowing your budget should help the therapist create a plan that works for your family or make recommendations for other services that may be effective. Depending on your budget and goals/concerns, the therapist can help you prioritize which goals to work on first and discuss options to make therapy more affordable. For example, spending more time on parent and caregiver training may mean that caregivers can work toward the goals without having to pay for a therapist to work directly with the child.

### ***Will the therapist collaborate with other professionals involved in my child's care?***

If you are working with other professionals, you may want your therapist to consult with them to gain information about your child's needs and/or share their recommendations. Therapists should feel comfortable working with anyone involved in your child's care.

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

### ***Comfort level with therapist***

The therapist will interact with your child and may come into your home and interact with the rest of your family on a frequent basis, so it is important that you are comfortable with them. If you don't feel comfortable asking them questions or sharing your concerns with them, it probably is not a good fit.

### ***Goals***

The therapist should be receptive to your and your child's goals and help guide you in breaking down the goals into smaller steps or prioritizing what needs to be done first. Sometimes it is difficult for a therapist to do this prior to observing your child, but in the initial discussions, you should leave feeling like your needs were heard and that you and the therapist will work as a team in creating the goals.

### *Can the therapist teach you?*

Starting a behaviour therapy or understanding the principles of ABA can be confusing. The therapist should be able to talk to you about therapy and ABA using language and examples you understand. If you don't understand why they make a recommendation, be sure to ask them.

### *Do you have a plan you feel comfortable with?*

After your first meeting with a therapist, the therapist should be able to discuss different service options for ABA. This includes direct 1:1 work with your child, group-based therapy, mediator models of service (where parents and caregivers are trained to implement the intervention), or any combination of the above. The therapist may not be able to provide all of those models, but should be able to discuss them with you and provide insight into which may be best suited for your family and goals. You should feel like you have a general idea of how the therapist works and what their general plan is moving forward in therapy with your child, or where you may be able to access the service you are looking for if they do not offer it. They will not have specific strategies or recommendations until they meet and assess your child, but should be able to explain what the next steps are and give you a rough timeline for them.

### *What is the difference between a Senior Therapist, Clinical Supervisor, Instructor Therapist, Behaviour Consultant, etc.?*

The therapist should explain what their role(s) are and what the difference between these therapists are, as it relates to your child. Generally, Senior Therapists and Clinical Supervisors are therapists who **design and supervise** programs. Instructor Therapists **implement** these programs through working directly (1:1) with your child for several hours every week, and are overseen by a Senior Therapist/Clinical Supervisor regularly. Behaviour Consultants are therapists who typically **design and oversee** interventions focused on a couple of very specific goals at a time or make recommendations for a child following an assessment. Behaviour Consultants usually train others (parents, caregivers, etc.) to implement the strategies and/or will work 1:1 with the child for an hour or two per week. Some Senior Therapists and Behaviour Consultants met criteria to be Clinical Supervisors, and therefore do not require an additional supervisor to be involved under the Ontario Autism Program.

## **KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER WHEN CONSIDERING ABA SERVICES FOR YOUR CHILD**

### *ABA therapies should focus only on skills that are going to improve your child's quality of life*

Therapists should target and work on goals that make your child's life better, easier, and/or safer. ABA programs should not focus on goals that will have little impact on your child's quality of life or remove little behaviour quirks that make them who they are (e.g., repetitive behaviours that are not harmful to the child).

### *ABA cannot promise or guarantee results*

No behaviour therapist can make promises or guarantees about the skills your child will develop within an ABA-based program. Therapists can talk with you about what strategies we have the best evidence for and what they think the best strategy is, but cannot promise it will work. They can guarantee that they will collect and analyze

data to determine if progress is being made, and if not that they will problem solve to adjust strategies or make alternative recommendations to you.

***ABA should make good sense***

When meeting with any behaviour therapist, trust your intuition. Although ABA can be very complex, a good therapist should be able to explain the process in a way that makes sense to you and answer all of your questions in a supportive way. If you feel the therapist is trying to sell you on a specific service that they cannot explain in a way that makes sense to you, this may not be a good sign. Never hesitate to ask for clarification or disagree with the therapist, discussions should always be collaborative.