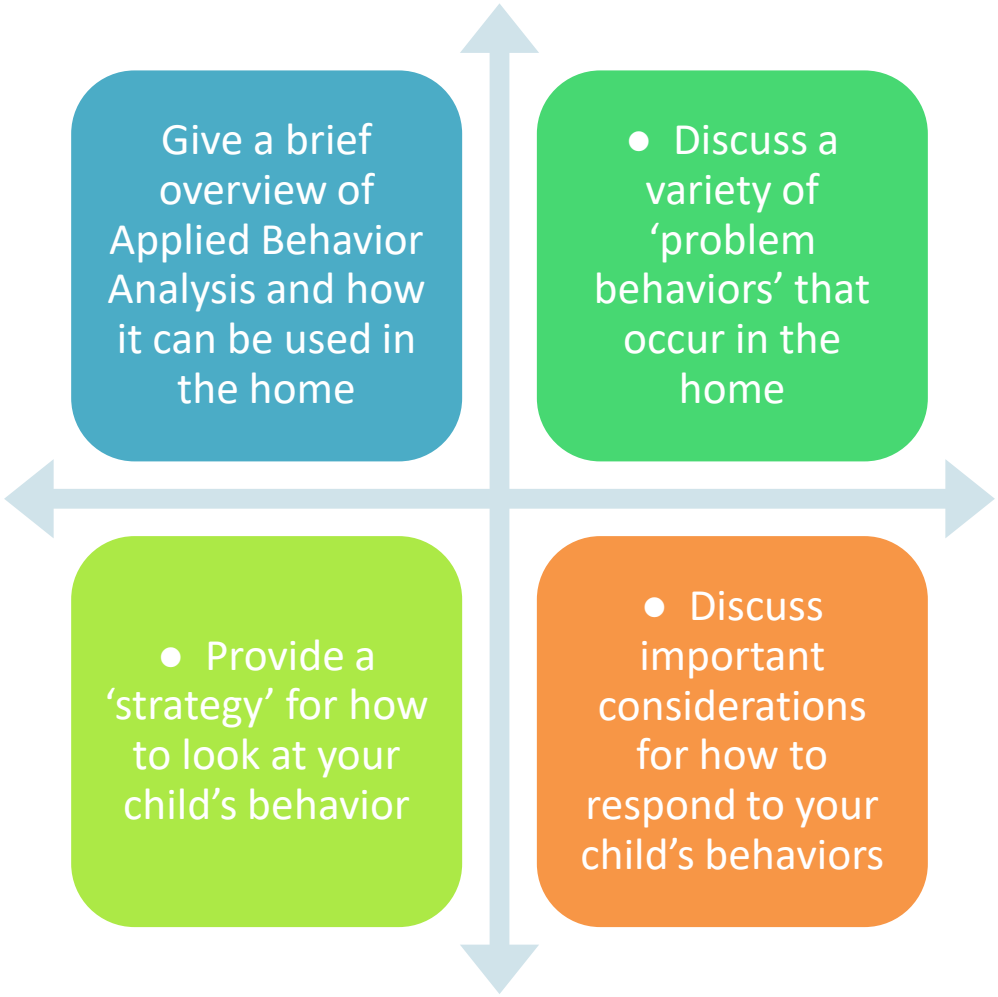
Understanding Behavior Through ABA
A Parent Guide

Colleen Wells

Amazing Transformations

In Tonight's Presentation



What Is ABA?

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)

- Evidence-based approach
- Focuses on teaching skills and reducing unsafe behaviors
- Looks at how the environment affects behavior
- Uses positive, proactive strategies
- ABA helps us understand *why* behaviors happen and teaches children safer, more effective ways to communicate and cope.

Why Behavior Happens

What is your child trying to tell you?

Behavior is communication

All behavior happens for a reason

Sometimes behavior has more than one reason

Understanding the reason helps us respond better

Children may not have the skills yet to express needs

- Behavior often replaces words

- Especially true for:
  - Young children
  - Children with autism
  - Children with communication delays
  - Children who have difficulty with self regulation
  - Children with anxiety
  - Children with ADHD

Why some kids need a different approach

Autism affects communication and regulation

Children may struggle to express needs with words

Sensory input can feel overwhelming

Predictability and routine are very important

- Consider (or write down) 1 behavior that you would like to change/improve in your child.

The 4 Core Functions of Behavior



Escape – avoiding a task or situation



Attention – seeking interaction



Tangible – wanting an item or activity



Sensory – seeking or avoiding sensory input

Using ABCs to Understand Behavior

A – Antecedent: what happens before

B – Behavior: what the child does

C – Consequence: what happens after

ABCs help us find patterns

What is the function?



WHAT'S THE FUNCTION?

Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
Mom is talking to another adult	Child throws toy at mom	Mom says "Don't do that!"
Child is playing with sibling	Child knocks over siblings legos	Dad comes over and reprimands child, saying "you need to say you're sorry!"
Child is playing outside on bike.	Child rides their bike past designated turn around spot	Grandmother runs after child, waving arms to stop

Common Triggers



Being told no or asked to wait



Hard or frustrating school work



Loud or crowded environments



Unexpected changes



Ipad dies



Sibling walks in



Transitions

”Nothing happened, s/he just started ____” is not an option!

Early Warning Signs

- Fidgeting or pacing
- Refusal or verbal protests
- Changes in tone or body language
- Withdrawal or self-talk

Proactive Strategies

- Visual schedules and clear routines
- Choices throughout the day
- Movement and sensory breaks
- Previewing changes ahead of time

Reinforcement Works

Praise and reward positive behavior

Catch your child being successful

Reinforcement increases skills

It is more effective than punishment

Teaching Replacement Behaviors

What Do We Want Them to Do Instead?

Teach “Break please” instead of aggression

Teach pointing or AAC instead of screaming

Teach asking for help instead of eloping

Key Message:

We don’t just reduce behavior—we *teach* skills.

Emotional Regulation Skills

Strategies:

- Deep breathing
- Movement breaks
- Sensory tools
- Calm-down spaces
- Exercise
- Modeling calm behavior

Important Note:

- These skills must be taught when the child is calm—not during a meltdown

Creating a Supportive Environment



Proactive Verbal Strategies

- **Use Positive, Directive Language**
- Tell the child what to do, not what not to do.
  Instead of: “Don’t run!” → Say: “Please walk with me.”
  Instead of: “Stop yelling!” → Say: “Use a quiet voice.”
- Positive directives help children understand expectations and make compliance easier.

Offer Clear, Simple Choices

Choices give a sense of control and reduce power struggles. Examples:

- “You want an apple or banana.”
- “Do you want to read a book with me or do a puzzle together?”
- “Do you want to walk or ride your scooter.”

“Do you want to pick up the blocks or the cars?”

When giving choices:

- Limit to 2–3 options that are all acceptable.
- Avoid “yes/no” choices that invite refusal.
- Present choices calmly and confidently.

Avoiding Power Struggles

Relationships over rules

Stay calm and respectful

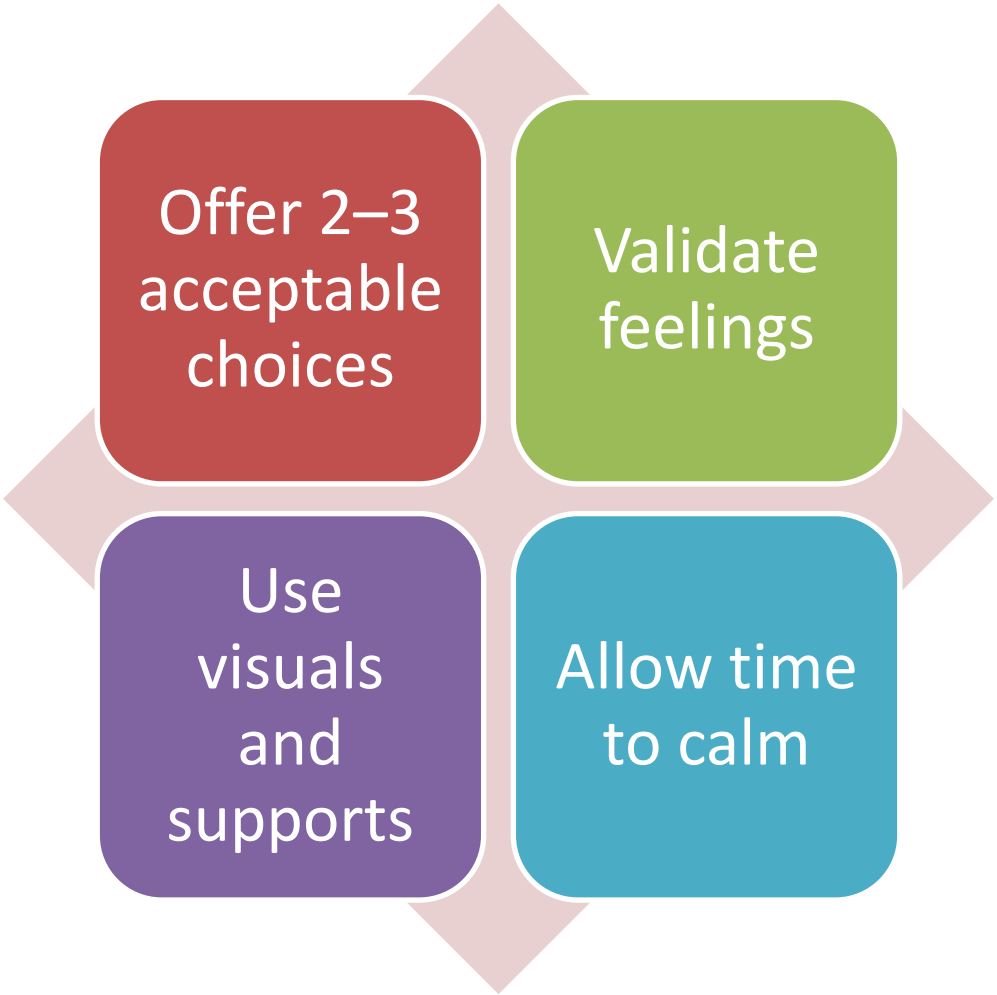
Pick your battles

Flexibility builds cooperation

What Not To Do

- Argue or threaten
- Use sarcasm or shame
- Escalate demands
- Force compliance during distress

What To Do Instead



Verbal De-Escalation Basics



CALM, NEUTRAL TONE



SIMPLE AND CLEAR LANGUAGE



GIVE SPACE



VALIDATE FEELINGS

HELP Strategy

Approach safely

Prompt a want or need

Wait 5–10 seconds

Praise and support calm behavior

PROMPT Strategy



WAIT Strategy

- Clear the area
- Monitor safely
- Reduce interaction
- Re-engage when calm

Key Phrases That Help

I can help you

You are safe

Take your time

Let’s do this together

Key Takeaways

Behavior is communication

Prevention is powerful

Calm adults create calm children

De-escalation is about connection