

**E.M.O. BEHAVIOR LAB & CONSULTING**

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# ABA Strategies for Families

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A Parent's Guide to Evidence-Based Tools

- Functional Communication Training (FCT)
- Differential Reinforcement (DRA)
- Visual Supports
- Timers & Transitions
- First-Then Boards
- Token Economy

Science-backed · Family-centered · Bilingual ABA Services

# Welcome, Families!

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is a science-based approach to understanding and improving behavior. At E.M.O. Behavior Lab & Consulting, we believe every family deserves practical, evidence-based tools they can use at home — in plain language, without the jargon.

This guide covers six of the most effective ABA strategies, with clear explanations, real examples, and steps you can start using today.

## What is ABA?

ABA stands for **Applied Behavior Analysis** — the science of learning and behavior. It helps us understand *why* behaviors happen and teaches new, functional skills. ABA is the most evidence-supported treatment for autism, with decades of peer-reviewed research.

## The ABCs of Behavior

A — Antecedent	B — Behavior	C — Consequence
What happens <i>before</i> the behavior	What the person <i>does</i>	What happens <i>after</i> , affecting whether it recurs

Understanding this ABC pattern is the foundation. Every strategy in this guide works by modifying antecedents, teaching new behaviors, or adjusting consequences.

# Functional Communication Training

FCT · Replacing behavior with better communication

## What is FCT?

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FCT teaches your child to communicate their needs appropriately — replacing behaviors like hitting, screaming, or tantrums with words, pictures, signs, or AAC devices.

### Why it works:

- Challenging behavior happens because the child is communicating something (I want this, I don't want that).
- FCT gives them a better tool to say the same thing — making the challenging behavior unnecessary.
- Decades of research confirm FCT as one of the most effective behavior interventions available.

## How to Use FCT at Home:

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- 1 Identify *why* the behavior happens — attention, escape, access to something, sensory.
- 2 Choose a replacement: a word, phrase, picture card, sign, or AAC device output.
- 3 Teach the replacement by prompting it *before* the challenging behavior starts.
- 4 Immediately honor the request when your child uses the replacement behavior.
- 5 Gradually reduce how quickly you respond to the old behavior while always responding to the new one.

### Example:

*Your child screams when they want a snack. You teach them to hand you a picture card. Every time they use the card, you immediately give the snack. Screaming gets no response. Within days, the card replaces the screaming.*

#### ■ Key Principle:

Make the replacement behavior EASIER than the challenging behavior. If appropriate communication requires more effort, your child will return to what works fastest.

# Differential Reinforcement (DRA)

DRA · Reinforce the good, redirect the rest

## What is DRA?

DRA means you **reinforce a good alternative behavior** while withholding reinforcement from the problem behavior. You are not punishing — you are making the appropriate behavior more worthwhile.

Problem Behavior	Alternative to Reinforce
Grabbing items from others	Asking "Can I have that please?"
Hitting to get attention	Tapping shoulder + saying "Excuse me"
Throwing materials when frustrated	Raising hand or using a break card
Running away during tasks	Requesting a break appropriately

## How to Use DRA at Home:

- **Catch them being good.** When your child does the alternative behavior, reinforce immediately and enthusiastically.
- **Be consistent.** The problem behavior should no longer produce the same outcome — every time, without exception.
- **Choose powerful reinforcers.** The reward must be worth it to *your child*, not what you think they should like.
- **Keep it brief at first.** Reinforce the alternative behavior frequently early on, then gradually thin the schedule.

### Example:

*Your child grabs toys from siblings. You start reinforcing any time they ask "Can I play too?" with praise and immediate access. Grabbing gets redirected. Within two weeks, asking becomes the go-to.*

### ■ Remember:

DRA is not ignoring bad behavior — it is investing your reinforcement where it counts. The magic is in rewarding the right behavior consistently, every single time at first.

# Visual Supports

Pictures, schedules, and symbols that build independence

## What are Visual Supports?

Visual supports are pictures, symbols, or written words that help your child understand expectations, predict what comes next, make choices, and communicate. They reduce anxiety and increase independence.

<b>Picture Schedules</b>	Show activities in order for the day or a specific task. Reduces anxiety about what comes next. Can be full-day or task-specific (morning routine, homework routine, etc.).
<b>↔ First-Then Boards</b>	Show two items: first do this, then you get that. Simple, visual, and powerful. Prevents arguments about when preferred activities happen.
<b>Choice Boards</b>	Offer 2–4 picture options for activities, foods, or break choices. Gives your child control and reduces demand avoidance.
<b>Visual Rules</b>	Simple picture/word cards showing expected behavior (quiet hands, walking feet, waiting). Post where they matter most.
<b>Token Boards</b>	Shows how many tokens earned toward a reward. Pairs with a token economy system — see the next strategy.

### Example:

*You post a 6-step morning routine with pictures on the bathroom mirror. Your child checks off each step independently. Morning meltdowns drop because they know exactly what is expected and what comes next.*

### Tip:

Use real photos of your child doing the steps when possible. Laminate and add velcro for durability. Free tools: Boardmaker, SymbolStix, Canva, or Google Images.

# Timers & Transitions

Making time visible so endings feel safe

## Why Timers?

Many children struggle with transitions — stopping preferred activities or switching tasks. Visual timers make abstract time concrete. When a child can see time passing, transitions become predictable rather than threatening.

<b>Visual Timer</b>	Shows time disappearing visually (Time Timer brand or free app). Far more effective than a number counting down.
<b>Countdown Warnings</b>	"You have 5 more minutes, then we're going to the car." Warn at 5, 2, and 1 minute.
<b>Now/Next Board</b>	Shows current activity and what comes immediately after — reduces "what's next" anxiety.
<b>Transition Object</b>	A small item the child carries from one activity to the next — signals the change and gives their hands something to do.

## Transition Tips That Work:

- **Always give advance warning** — never abrupt endings.
- **Say what comes next**, not just what is ending: "When the timer goes off, we're going to have a snack!"
- **Pair transitions with something motivating** — use the Premack Principle.
- **Use the same phrase every time** so your child can predict the routine.
- **Celebrate successful transitions** — even small ones deserve acknowledgment.

### Example:

*Your child melts down every time the iPad session ends. You start using a visual timer, give a 2-minute warning, and say "iPad goes to sleep, then snack time!" Within two weeks, meltdowns are replaced by your child handing you the iPad when the timer sounds.*

### ■ Top Pick:

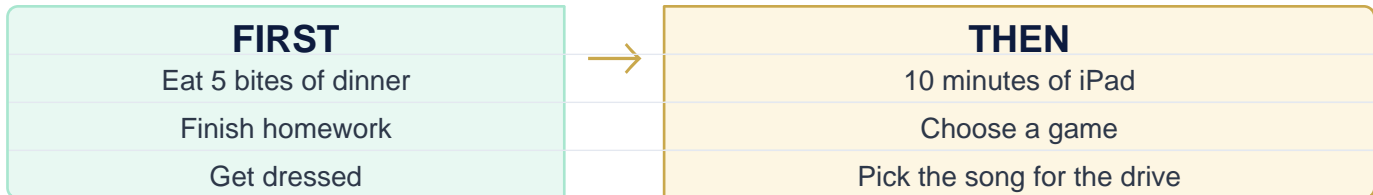
The Time Timer ([timetimer.com](http://timetimer.com)) is the gold standard visual timer for families. Available in physical and free app versions for iOS and Android.

# First-Then Boards

Premack Principle · Engineering motivation

## What is a First-Then Board?

The First-Then Board applies the **Premack Principle**: a less preferred activity followed by a more preferred one. In plain terms: *"First do this, then you get that."* Simple, visual, and one of the most effective tools in ABA.



## Rules for First-Then Boards:

- **Show it visually** — use picture cards on a board your child can see, not just verbal reminders.
- **Keep "First" achievable** — start with tasks they can complete with minimal support.
- **Always follow through** — when they complete "First," deliver "Then" immediately. No delays, no changing the deal.
- **Let your child choose "Then" when possible** — motivation increases when they have a voice.

### Example:

*Your child refuses homework every day. You show a First-Then board: "First homework, then Minecraft for 20 minutes." You set a timer. Homework refusal drops dramatically because the outcome is visible, concrete, and guaranteed.*

#### ■ The Science:

The Premack Principle has decades of research. High-probability behaviors make low-probability behaviors more likely. You are not bribing — you are engineering motivation.

# Token Economy

Building motivation for sustained effort

## What is a Token Economy?

A token economy is a structured reinforcement system where your child earns tokens for target behaviors and exchanges them for a preferred reward. It is the most researched behavior intervention in ABA history.

Tokens	Target Behaviors	Backup Reinforcers
Stars, stickers, chips, points — something physical to collect and trade.	Specific, observable behaviors: following instructions, completing tasks, using kind words.	What they are working toward: screen time, an outing, a toy — whatever motivates THEM.

## Setting Up Your Token Board:

- **Start small** — 3 to 5 tokens max. Do not make them wait too long for the reward.
- **Define the target behavior clearly** — "using kind words" not "being good."
- **Deliver tokens immediately** after the behavior with specific praise: "I love how you asked nicely — here is your star!"
- **Let them choose their reinforcer** from a menu you both agree on.
- **Fade gradually** — once behavior is consistent, increase tokens required before payout.

### Example:

*Your child earns a star sticker every time they complete a morning routine step without being asked twice. After 5 stars, they get 30 extra minutes of video game time. Within 3 weeks, the morning routine runs independently and the token board is no longer needed.*

### ■ Key Insight:

Token economies work because they bridge behavior and delayed reinforcement. Your child learns that effort pays off — a life skill far beyond any single behavior.

## Quick Reference Guide

Strategy	Use When...	Key Action
<b>FCT</b>	Child uses behavior to communicate	Teach a replacement communication behavior
<b>DRA</b>	Want to increase good, decrease problem behavior	Reinforce the alternative, withhold for the old
<b>Visual Supports</b>	Child struggles with transitions or expectations	Make expectations visual and predictable
<b>Timers</b>	Transitions cause meltdowns	Give visual warning before endings
<b>First-Then</b>	Child refuses tasks or demands preferred items	First [task] → Then [reward] — visible & concrete
<b>Token Economy</b>	Child needs sustained motivation	Earn tokens → exchange for preferred reward

**Remember:** Consistency is the #1 factor in whether ABA strategies work. Every person in the home should use the same language, the same systems, and the same follow-through. If you try a strategy for 1–2 weeks with fidelity and see no change, reach out to your BCBA.

### **E.M.O. Behavior Lab & Consulting**

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