

I'd never heard of a BCBA until I needed one. And once I needed one...it was all a matter of trust. Trust that can, sadly, be exploited, as it was when my family needed services. Nebraska needs licensure for Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs) to ensure families in need don't have to solely rely on trust to receive the best services possible.

When my child was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, I didn't know where to begin. On the day of diagnosis, I was given a list of preferred providers in our area. Without this list, I would have been completely lost. I have never heard of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy, had no idea what it entailed or why it was important – I placed all my trust in the list I was provided.

Third down on the list was a provider that was willing to see us immediately. I thought, "No waitlist, what a blessing!" The other providers on the list all had daunting waitlists and everyone we spoke with said that ABA therapy was the gold standard of services for children on the spectrum. So – trusting the advice I'd received so far – I gladly accepted the services offered from this provider.

Looking back, their eagerness to immediately accept our application should have been a warning sign.

We completed the onboarding assessment with the BCBA, an individual who also owned the company and was the only BCBA on staff at the time. The BCBA attended our first in-home therapy session for only the first 10 minutes, at which time they went over our child's assessment results. They discussed some program ideas for our child, but we as parents did not receive a written copy of any goals, nor were we offered a chance to input our opinion for the programs.

After our first in-home therapy session, the BCBA was never present again, so I placed my trust in the behavior technicians. I had no idea what an ABA session entailed. The sessions appeared disjointed to me – a bit unstructured and unorganized –but I was new to the world of ABA and determined to keep an open mind (though I disliked the lack of structure). I sat in on the first sessions, both to learn and to observe, and always somehow ended up taking charge of the sessions. The techs had an air of passiveness; they would look to me for advice on the next move. It hinted at poor training, and the fact that we had not seen the BCBA since the beginning of the first appointment made me think twice about this provider. But I trusted the advice that ABA was the ideal route – and anyone owning an ABA organization must know what they're doing, I thought – so I held my tongue. Still, it seemed odd to me that the techs arrived with no materials – no data sheets, no toys, no computer, not even a pencil to write notes.

Our child was not responding well to the sessions' structure. The procedures they utilized caused an increase in our child's problem behavior, a point I brought to the BCBA's attention. All the communication was via email or phone – as we had not seen the BCBA in person since the first visit – and though I discussed my concerns several times, the BCBA did not attend a therapy session to see the problem behavior in real time. The behavior was brushed off and explained away, despite the BCBA never seeing the behavior nor having enough data to explain the behavior. There was no collaboration that I saw between the BCBA and the techs, as the sessions did not change and the behavior continued to worsen.

Finally, I could hold my tongue no longer. One day, the tech arrived with nothing in hand again and said to me, “So, what should we work on today?” I stared dumbfounded. They didn’t have a lesson plan for this session?! This was the final straw – I had finally lost all trust in this provider. Since our child’s BCBA was the only BCBA on staff, and there was no clinic director, no board, not even a physical address for the this provider, there was no one else I could talk to about our frustrations. The only thing we could do was leave this provider and try for a different experience at a different location.

And we found that experience. Our second attempt at ABA therapy was incredibly positive: strong communication with parents, hands-on BCBA’s who provided parent trainings, structured sessions that aligned with our child’s learning style, multiple BCBA’s on staff for peer-to-peer collaboration, and a hierarchy within the clinic that assured oversight and accountability. Our child’s behavior improved and their skills grew exponentially. Our trust in ABA was restored.

It wasn’t until after we found the second provider that we realized just how poor our initial experience with a BCBA had been. You trust that an individual who is a Board Certified Behavior Analysts – as well as a PhD and a business owner – would be more competent. But an impressive C.V. doesn’t always equate to strong ethics and integrity. This BCBA is operating as a provider of services but has no one to answer to: no other BCBA’s on staff, no supervisor, no board of directors. Without any oversight, who is to say that their services aren’t being offered at their highest moral code?

As a parent, I wholeheartedly support the need for licensure of all Board Certified Behavior Analysts. As the rate of diagnosis grows, the need for services will also grow. This will open the opportunity for self-contained businesses like the one we found to provide services without any oversight or consequences. Without licensure, there is no way for parents to report substandard services, no one to hold these providers accountable. Without licensure, there is no expectation or incentive for all ABA providers to operate with transparency. As the need for services grows, I fear a rise in predatory clinics: businesses that offer only at-home services, with no local address, in which the families do not have regular in-person contact with a BCBA nor any contact information for a director or supervisor should they need to report substandard practices. Therapy is about building relationships with families and building trust. Trust is everything for a family in need of ABA services, but trust shouldn’t be the only factor in holding those services to a high standard. We need licensure in the state of Nebraska.