

Building the Foundation

Helping Your Child Gain Independence: Practical ABA Strategies for Parents and Caregivers

Keep this handout with your Independence Toolkit. It summarizes the three sessions in Section 1 and the strategies you can start using at home this week.

Session 1 · Understanding behavior and reinforcement

What it is

Behavior is anything your child does that you can see or count. Every behavior sits inside a pattern called the ABCs.

	What it means	Example
A — Antecedent	What happens right before	"Time to put on your shoes."
B — Behavior	What your child does	Puts on one shoe, then stops
C — Consequence	What happens right after	You finish the second shoe

Reinforcement is anything that happens right after a behavior that makes it more likely next time.

Why it matters for independence

- Children repeat what works, and skip what doesn't pay off.
- Helping too fast can accidentally teach your child to wait for help.
- Independence takes effort — reinforcement is what makes that effort worth it.

What you can do

1. Describe behavior in observable words: "threw the cup," not "was being difficult."
2. Notice the ABCs three times a day and write them on Toolkit page 1.
3. Reinforce effort, not only success — reaching for the zipper counts.
4. Deliver reinforcement within 3–5 seconds.
5. Be specific: "You put your plate in the sink all by yourself!"

Take-home challenge

Pick ONE skill your child can almost do alone. Log three ABC observations, and reinforce one attempt at that skill every day this week.

Session 2 · Schedules of reinforcement

What it is

A schedule is simply how often reinforcement shows up.

- Continuous — every correct response is reinforced. Best for a brand-new skill.
- Intermittent — some responses are reinforced. Builds skills that keep going without you.
- Thinning — moving gradually from continuous to intermittent, on purpose.

Why it matters for independence

- Real life is intermittent — nobody praises every step forever.
- Thin schedules build persistence through the hard parts.

- Staying rich too long ties the skill to your presence.
- Thinning too fast can make the skill disappear — back up instead of pushing.

What you can do

6. Start rich on any new skill — reinforce every attempt for the first several days.
7. Thin one step at a time: every response → every 2nd → every 3rd → end of routine.
8. Watch the skill, not the calendar. If effort drops, go back one step.
9. Keep praise warm and varied so it stays meaningful.

Take-home challenge

Keep the same skill. Thin your reinforcement by exactly one step and track daily on Toolkit page 2.

Session 3 • Identifying motivation

What it is

Motivation is what makes a reinforcer worth working for — and it changes all day long. Explore three categories:

Things	Activities	People & attention
Snacks, toys, screen time, sensory items	Bubbles, music, a walk, choosing the playlist	Silly voices, high fives, one-on-one time

Why it matters for independence

- Independence costs effort, and motivation covers the difference.
- The wrong reinforcer looks like refusal.
- Most of what your child loves is already free and already in your home.
- Letting your child choose is an early self-advocacy skill.

What you can do

10. Build a written reinforcer menu of 8–10 items and post it at home.
11. Run a 2-choice preference check: offer two options and see which one your child reaches for.
12. Ask instead of assuming: "Bubbles or music when you're done?"
13. Save the strongest reinforcers for the hardest skills.
14. Rotate reinforcers weekly so they don't lose their power.

Take-home challenge

Run a 2-choice check on three different days, then write your top five reinforcers on Toolkit page 3.

Words you'll hear in this series

Term	Plain-language meaning
Behavior	Anything your child does that you can see or count
Antecedent	What happens right before a behavior
Consequence	What happens right after a behavior
Reinforcement	Something after a behavior that makes it more likely to happen again
Continuous schedule	Reinforcing every single correct response
Intermittent schedule	Reinforcing some correct responses
Thinning	Slowly reinforcing less often so the skill lasts
Preference assessment	A simple way to find out what your child wants to work for
Reinforcer rotation	Changing reinforcers regularly so they keep their value

