

Access to Applied Behavior Analysis in California



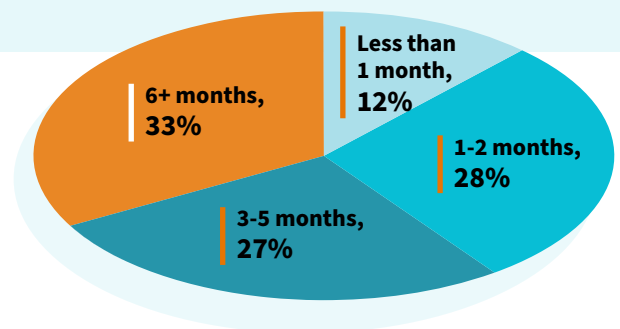
Caregivers of children and youth with special health care needs were surveyed about their experiences with accessing Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), a common treatment for autism and other developmental delays, in the last year.

ABA is an intensive therapy designed for children on the autism spectrum with significant functional limitations.

It can address communication, emotional and behavioral self-regulation, self-help skills, activities of daily living, and social interaction. It can also reduce negative behaviors, such as self-harm.

Wait times for starting ABA therapy in the last year

For the 227 caregivers in this study whose children started ABA therapy last year, the average wait time for therapy was three months, **with a third of respondents reporting waiting six months or more.**



The process for starting ABA therapy

- To receive ABA therapy, a child must first complete a diagnostic assessment for autism and pervasive developmental delays with a qualified health care provider, such as a developmental behavioral pediatrician, psychologist, or psychiatrist. Depending on the result, the provider may then refer the child to ABA therapy.
- A 2023 survey of large pediatric specialist groups (like children's hospitals) estimated an average wait time of 3.5 months (106 calendar days) to see developmental behavioral pediatricians in California.
- Due to a national shortage of psychologists, psychiatrists, and other relevant health care providers, wait times for evaluations are long and delay critically needed ABA therapy for children.

Caregivers expressed concerns about the impacts of long delays in waiting for their child to receive a diagnostic evaluation and then ABA treatment.

“It took us many months to see a Neurologist. We knew that [child] was having developmental delays and was potentially on the Autism Spectrum. Eventually getting the official diagnosis allowed us to then get ABA services which were covered by [the Regional Center] and now our primary insurance.”

“Waiting for ABA therapy was stressful.”

“Delayed diagnosis. We were not able to maximize on her ABA hours because of this. Prior to Neurology appt, my child only had 10 hours of ABA provided by the Regional Center. Once she was diagnosed, we were able to get approved for 25 hours of ABA from insurance.”

About this survey:

Data are from a web-based survey of 646 caregivers of children and youth with special health care needs conducted by the UCSF Center for Excellence in Primary Care and Practical Research Solutions in partnership with 17 Family Resource Centers across California from August to October 2023.

Of the children and youth represented in the survey, 76% were covered by Medi-Cal and 49% were 5 years old or younger. Participants were from Southern California (28%), the Central Valley (12%), the Central Coast (23%), and Northern California (37%). More on methods is available at <https://cepc.ucsf.edu/children-and-youth-special-healthcare-needs>.

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