



## Autism Treatment: Understanding the Process

Now that you've chosen a treatment provider, you may be wondering what to expect next. The treatment process varies from provider to provider, but here are the basic steps that you should expect:

**Benefit Check:** Your provider should ask for your insurance information and contact your insurance company to check your benefits. This includes confirming if your plan covers autism therapy and finding out your co-pay and deductible. This amount will vary depending on whether your provider is in-network or out-of-network for your insurance company.

**Pre-Authorization:** Before starting treatment, your provider should contact your insurance company to request authorization for treatment. Each insurance company may have different requirements to approve treatment. Your provider will find out what these requirements are and submit the necessary information. The provider may contact you to give them paperwork, such as proof of the individual's diagnosis.

**Assessment:** Once authorization has been provided, a master's- or doctoral-level clinician will schedule several visits to meet with your family to conduct their assessments. They will differ from the types of assessments your child received as part of their diagnosis. Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) assessments usually consist of, at minimum, a behavior assessment to gain information about any behaviors of concern and a skills assessment to gather information about communication, social and other skills. The assessment process often begins with an interview to learn more about your observations, needs and goals for treatment. They will spend some time working with your child or loved one with autism, which may look a lot like play time, to verify goals for treatment. During this phase, it is important that you talk to your provider about what is important to your family. If you haven't already asked these questions, be sure to ask them now. If anything doesn't sound "right," contact your insurance company for help.

**Treatment Planning:** Based on the information that they learned during the assessment, the clinician will create a treatment plan based on your family's needs, goals, preferences and values.

This plan will include goals for child or loved one with autism, as well as goals for you. Parent/guardian goals are designed to support caregivers in learning new skills that will benefit your family. These goals are just as important as the goals the paraprofessionals will work on during their sessions with your child.

Once the clinician completes the treatment plan, they will review it with you. You have the right to ask questions and voice any concerns you may have.

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**Treatment:** Your provider will submit to insurance for treatment approval. This could take up to a few days. Once approved, your provider can begin treatment.

Treatment may occur in your home or in a clinic. Sometimes sessions involve going out into the community to practice skills.

Your child will likely work with several people at the provider agency, including the clinician who conducted the assessment and multiple paraprofessionals who work under the clinician's supervision.

Most of the treatment will be done by the paraprofessionals. The clinician will oversee their work, measure progress, update the treatment plan on an ongoing basis, and meet with your family regularly.

You are a very important part of your loved one's treatment team. Take advantage of any opportunities to participate in the process.

Your clinician should be able to tell you what your child or loved one is working on, how they are doing, changes that need to be made, as well as answer any questions you may have. As your child or loved one meets goals, more will be added until they are ready for discharge.

Unless your child or loved one is sick, it's important to stick to the recommended ABA service schedule. This schedule is set up to give enough time to work on treatment goals, and being consistent helps your child make and maintain progress.

Your clinician will meet with you regularly for coaching sessions. Parent/guardian coaching is one of the most important parts of treatment. This is when the clinician helps you learn new skills for interacting with your child or loved one so that he/she can maintain the progress they are making in treatment. You should also use this time to let your clinician know about how things are going outside of treatment sessions, such as any changes (positive or negative) in behavior, any new medications or medical conditions, or any changes in your family's routines (e.g., loss of job, new person living in the home, changing schools). These things can have a big impact, so it's important for your clinician to know about them.

**Reauthorization:** Your provider will contact your insurance company periodically during treatment to discuss the treatment plan and obtain authorization to continue treatment. This usually occurs every six months and involves some re-assessment procedures and summaries of progress over the last six months. Your provider should share this information with you.

**Fading:** The goal of any treatment is to develop skills that you can implement independently without the presence of a clinician. As your child gains skills and decreases negative behaviors, your provider will begin giving them more and more opportunities to spread their wings independently. During this phase, your child will begin needing fewer treatment hours. Your clinician will work with you to develop a plan to slowly decrease (or "fade") treatment hours at the ideal rate to help you and your child reach a point where you are able to thrive without treatment. As part of this process, they will recommend other community supports or services to consider.

**Discharge:** Congratulations! It took a lot of time and work to get here, so be sure to celebrate. Take stock of all the things your child and family can do that weren't possible before. Your provider will work with you to set a discharge date and to develop a plan for what to do if new problems occur in the future.

*Reviewed by Senior Director – Clinical Strategy, Research & Autism, LCSW, BCBA, CCM*

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