

# Reaching Milestones One Step at a Time

by Ilana Hoffer Skoff with Mia Buchwald Gelles

**W**hat would you do if your child didn't learn like other children? What if your child didn't relate to other children? What would you do if you were told your child was on the autism spectrum?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is considered the 3<sup>rd</sup> most common developmental disability in the United States. As many as 1 in 150 children are on the autism spectrum, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

That adds up to almost 1.5 million people in the United States, including more than 45,000 in the state of Ohio. Government statistics suggest the rate of autism is rising 10-17% annually. Of the approximately 4 million babies born every year, 24,000 of them will eventually be identified on the autism spectrum.

Today, almost everyone has heard of autism and may even have a family member who has been diagnosed on the autism spectrum. When our children were diagnosed more than a decade ago, things were different. Just getting an accurate diagnosis was a challenge because many doctors were hesitant to label children. They refrained from recommending particular methods of treatment, fearing that the suggestion of an intensive therapy would be too much for parents to handle.

Also, schools for students with autism didn't exist in Cleveland. We experienced firsthand what was missing in Cleveland for families affected by autism — trained professionals to work with our children at home and at school.

Yet, it was an exciting time in the field of autism. Just when we needed help the most, we each discovered a recently published book about autism that detailed a curriculum focused on utilizing behavioral strategies to teach everything from how to play, to how to talk; from how to interact, to how to teach self-help skills. *Behavioral Intervention for Young Children with Autism* by Catherine Maurice became our guidebook. We each started home programs using ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis) to teach our children the life skills other children pick up naturally.

We also began taking our children to a

speech therapist to supplement their home programs. We first met in the therapist's waiting room. It took some time before we actually had an "adult" conversation because we were always running after our own children. When we did talk, we found we had much in common, including the fact that we had read Maurice's book and were using ABA techniques with our children. We became friends, supporting and guiding each other through the changes and adjustments in our children's programs.

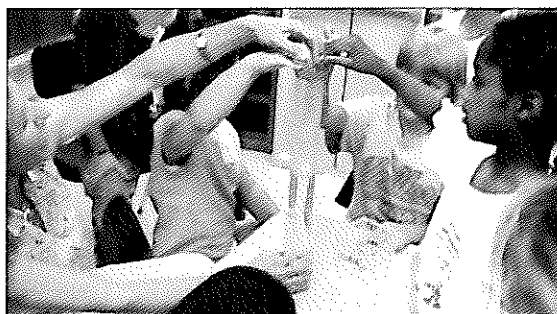
Even though there is an emphasis on being consistent within the behavioral system of ABA, it's a flexible method and can be used in various situations and settings. Mia has used ABA programs to teach language, conversation skills and negotiating techniques. I have used it to teach language, and to provide structure, as with visual and written schedules. ABA has been a helpful tool for breaking down skills, such as how to take an airplane ride, into discrete tasks; or how to brush teeth by teaching individual steps and then chaining the entire process.

Deciding what to teach may be hard because there are so many things to work on. I found that my priorities are determined by what is important to my family. My daughter and I frequently traveled out of town to meet with ABA consultants. On one such trip, my daughter refused to board the plane for the return flight to Cleveland.

She already knew too well what happens on a plane — her ears hurt, she said. Although this information came at an inopportune moment, it was an exciting

experience for me — hearing my daughter articulate her feelings, and realizing she knew how and what to anticipate in a given situation. After much cajoling by me and pressure from the flight staff to either board the flight or get left behind, we both boarded the plane.

When plans were made later that year to attend a cousin's wedding in Israel, I had a deadline in which to teach my daughter how to comfortably take a long flight. Using ABA strategies, I was able to prepare her for the 10 hour flight to Israel, plus a stop-over and plane change. Schedules, preparation and practice have been the keys to success for my daughter's participation in many typical social outings, as well as milestone events, such as her bat mitzvah this past winter.



A teacher training workshop.



Milestones Staff: Ilana Hoffer Skoff, Mia Buchwald Gelles, Kiersten Johnson, Stephanie Showalter. Photos courtesy of Milestones Organization.