

Some say ABA is best suited for children on the low-functioning end of the spectrum, but this wasn't the experience Mia and I had. We used ABA to help fill in the gaps in our children's development.

It has been very gratifying to see the skills we targeted in ABA crop up in daily life. For example, at the age of 5, Mia's son began to yell, "Look, Mom, watch me!" seeking out an adult's attention. He also started asking spontaneous questions, which was such a miracle. He now has such a mastery of these skills that sometimes Mia forgets that he learned them in a deliberate step-by-step process.

Another important item to keep in mind is the notion of fostering a child's strengths and interests. It may seem as if your child doesn't have an interest or, alternatively, may be obsessed with something that doesn't seem to be a productive interest. Teaching a child how to gain pleasure from hobbies and leisure activities is a wonderful life-long skill. My daughter enjoys exercising. After recognizing that she kept watching a workout video, I taught her to follow the steps. Today, she regularly exercises in a fitness facility.

We had found the road map and the keys to help our children achieve, and we began to wonder, "Why isn't everyone isn't doing this and why aren't professionals implementing these techniques?"

After our children entered school, we had time on our hands and wanted to use our knowledge to help other families. We felt the way to improve services for individuals with autism was to better train the professionals working with them. With that mission, Milestones Organization was born.

We believed we had the tools to make a difference and were confident we could raise the level of local awareness, programming and support for those with autism. We were fortunate to have previously worked in the non-profit sector. We also had personal experience in teaching and guiding our own children, a strong family support system, and an unflappable attitude many call "chutzpah." We planned our first conference in 2003 and 400 people showed up. Clearly there was a need for Milestones.

Our goal with the annual conference was to provide both parents and professionals with opportunities for learning, engagement, awareness and networking which they otherwise wouldn't have. Participants in the Milestones conference learn firsthand about services available in our area and gain access to national experts in autism who are brought in as speakers. This interaction not only highlights what various agencies offer the community, it also invigorates and energizes the service providers. Breakout sessions throughout the day address issues of concern for young children, elementary, middle and high school students, as well as adults with autism or Asperger's syndrome.

In addition to the annual conference, we began to offer intensive hands-on training workshops for public school teachers during the summer because many teachers already in the field received little, or no, specialized training in how to work with students with autism. Milestones now offers a week-long training course

which includes lectures, role-playing, and working directly with a class of students with autism. Follow-up observations further strengthen the participants' skills in their own classrooms.

Because the need for continued support and training is so great, we recently developed additional programs to serve the community. During the past year, we started offering monthly family workshops across Northeast Ohio to help parents and caregivers learn strategies to use in their homes. We also offer referral support and consultation, and our website, www.milestones.org, includes information about local services, programs, and support groups.

Participants in Milestones' programs feel empowered with the knowledge and confidence to make improvements both in the home and at school. Behavioral intervention has the potential to make a positive difference in the scope of an autistic individual's independence and level of functioning. It can make the difference between interacting with others and not, being appropriate in public and not, holding a job and not.

Milestones efforts are geared toward supporting individuals with autism to enter the adult world with a measure of personal independence.

The mission of Milestones is to assist families along their journeys and train more professionals to better serve the autism community. Together, we can all raise awareness about the capabilities of individuals with autism and help them reach their potential.

