National ABA Service Quality Network

FROM PRACTICE STANDARDS TO OUTCOME STANDARDS:

UNIVERSAL ABA OUTCOMES

A Proposed Outcome-Based Quality Framework
for ABA Service Organizations
Version 1.0

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Provisional framework for discussion, testing, and refinement.
Not an accreditation standard or validated measure set.

Endorsed by the Executive Board of the National ABA Service Quality Network (NASQN) as a proposed framework for discussion, research, and continued refinement.

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AI Use Disclosure. The author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Microsoft CoPilot to support conceptual development of the proposed framework, explore alternative formulations, and assist with drafting, revision, and document design. The author directed this process and retains responsibility for the framework's content, interpretations, and conclusions. AI assistance does not constitute independent review or empirical validation of the framework.

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Disclaimer. This framework should be regarded as a conceptual model intended to stimulate discussion, guide future measurement development, and support stakeholder review. Publication does not imply validation, consensus endorsement, or readiness for benchmarking, accreditation, reimbursement, or other consequential uses.

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Executive Summary

The economics of applied behavior analysis (ABA) services have proliferated at a rate that has overwhelmed the infrastructure which supports ABA service delivery in America. It's time for a new direction in American ABA. It shall begin with the end: outcomes.

ABA service organizations may be evaluated through professional standards, payer requirements, staffing and utilization measures, documentation expectations, and clinical targets. These measures do not necessarily answer a more basic question:

"What valued ends should an ABA service organization reliably produce?"

This white paper proposes the transformation of ABA service delivery systems across America beginning with a small set of organizational outcomes, then working backward to identify and improve the conditions required to produce them.

The framework integrates healthcare quality, behavior analysis, and organizational quality management. It builds on distinctions among structures, processes, and outcomes, foundational dimensions of ABA and the organizational conception of ABA service delivery quality (ASDQ) proposed by Silbaugh and El Fattal (2022). Its contribution is a provisional synthesis for organizational evaluation and improvement, not a validated measure set.

The paper proposes seven core outcomes for discussion, research, and potential development by the National ABA Service Quality Network (NASQN): four operational outcomes and three clinical outcomes.

Operational outcomes describe valued products of the service delivery system:

1. Needed Care Accessed: Individuals who need clinically appropriate ABA services begin those services within clinically acceptable periods.
2. Planned Care Received: Clients receive clinically indicated services in the planned amount, form, and temporal distribution.
3. Safe Care Experienced: Individuals affected by service delivery remain free from preventable harm attributable to the service delivery system.
4. Intervention Effects Empirically Evaluated: Credible empirical evidence supporting defensible conclusions about intervention effects, including effective, ineffective, and inconclusive results.

Clinical outcomes describe valued results of treatment:

5. Meaningful Behavior Change Achieved: Clients demonstrate clinically significant changes in socially important behavior, including appropriate generalization and maintenance.
6. Stakeholder-Valued Change Achieved: Achieved clinical changes fulfill the purposes, needs, and legitimate requirements for which treatment was undertaken.
7. Reduced Dependence on Specialized Services: Clients achieve and sustain outcomes that permit clinically appropriate reductions in specialized treatment, successful transitions, or completion of ABA services when no longer needed.

The outcomes specify valued products rather than a uniform operating model. Staffing, supervision, treatment integrity, scheduling, and documentation remain important structures, processes, capabilities, or supporting indicators. Their relationships to outcomes require empirical investigation. Operational products can be intermediate outcomes without losing their status as valued ends.

Three cross-cutting performance dimensions complement the outcome set. Quality concerns whether outcomes satisfy their intended purposes and requirements. Value concerns outcomes relative to financial,

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human, temporal, and other resources consumed. Sustainability concerns whether desired outcomes can continue to be produced under acceptable resource conditions. These dimensions are an analytical elaboration of the broader ASDQ account, not additional outcomes.

Application of methods to transform service delivery systems will require valid and reliable measurement, equity, appropriate risk adjustment, and safeguards against gaming and other unintended effects. Observed improvement does not by itself demonstrate intervention effects, and reduced services do not establish clinical success without evidence of achieved and sustained benefit.

The proposed organizational transformation process involves five recurring steps:

1. Define outcomes and establish standards: Specify desired products, measurable requirements, and relevant stakeholder priorities.
2. Measure and evaluate performance: Establish a credible baseline and identify gaps across quality, value, and sustainability.
3. Evaluate organizational capability and determinants of performance: Examine system conditions, develop explanatory hypotheses, and test them with methods suited to the question.
4. Establish and operate a quality management system: Connect standards, monitoring, accountable decisions, responses, and verification through planning, assurance, control, and improvement.
5. Reevaluate and continuously improve: Assess effects and unintended consequences, preserve effective changes, and repeat the cycle as conditions and needs change.

NASQN aims to support construct refinement, measurement pilots, organizational learning, and applied research. The framework is intended for discussion and testing before any use in national ranking, accreditation, or financial accountability.

Central proposition

ABA service organizations should define the outcomes they exist to produce, establish standards for those outcomes, and systematically evaluate performance across the dimensions of quality, value, and sustainability. They should develop and maintain quality management systems that monitor performance, investigate the organizational conditions responsible for variation in outcomes, empirically evaluate the effects of changes to those conditions, and use the resulting evidence to plan, control, and continuously improve service delivery.

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