

*Managing Challenging Behaviors in a  
Preschool Boy with Advanced Verbal  
Skills through ABA Therapy.  
A Case Study of Educator Lack  
of Understanding and Behavior  
Reduction Strategies* \_\_\_\_\_

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**Abstract**

*This case study explores the implementation and outcomes of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy in the management of challenging behaviors in a five-year-old boy attending preschool. Although the child possesses very good verbal skills that are beyond his age, he exhibits challenging behaviors with high frequency and intensity, including disobedience, aggression, destruction of materials, victimization, attention seeking, rejection, and difficulty engaging in social play. These behaviors significantly affected his involvement in learning and peer relationships. Classroom educators expressed difficulty and uncertainty in how to manage these behaviors, often using ineffective strategies due to a lack of training in behavior-based interventions. The child was treated with individual ABA therapy by the psychologist who is also the child's therapist, for one hour per day, four times a week, at the KODDI Center. He also participated in group ABA therapy once a week for 90 minutes to improve social skills. Continuous collaboration with educators was carried out through data*

collection and information exchange. Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) showed that the problematic behaviors had a function to get attention, avoid demands and have access to preferred objects. Based on the FBA, a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) was developed and then implemented in the clinic and at school. A companion was recommended for the child at preschool.

The results showed a significant reduction in problematic behaviors, improved acceptance and increased social interactions. The study emphasizes the essential role of ABA in understanding the function of behavior, the importance of interprofessional collaboration and the need for training of educators in inclusive preschool education.

**Keywords:** ABA Therapy, preeschool, Challenging Behavior, assistant teacher, verbal skills, inclusive education.

## Introduction

The management of challenging behaviors in preschool education is still one of the greatest challenges for educators and professionals working with children with atypical development. In Albania, there is a lack of systematic and professional training for preschool teachers in functional behavioral assessment (FBA) and behavioral analysis-based interventions (ABA), meanwhile international literature emphasizes the importance of these two components for the inclusion and well-being of children in school settings (Horner et al., 2005; Sugai & Simonsen, 2012). In the Albanian reality, children who exhibit difficult behaviors are often negatively labeled (“unruly”, “aggressive”, “problem”), which has consequences for their social and academic development. Educators are not trained to understand the functions of behavior and use punitive or avoidance strategies, which usually worsen the situation. Children in inclusive preschool classes who exhibit challenging behaviors often face barriers in effectively participating in social and learning activities. When these behaviors come along with advanced verbal skills, teachers might find it difficult to understand what the child truly needs. They may think that the child is more emotionally mature than they actually are and it might lead to them expecting a level of self-control that’s beyond the child’s stage of development (Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, & Strain, 2003). Without professional training in behavior analysis, educators can often respond in ways that unintentionally reinforce a problematic behavior (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2020). This situation makes it necessary to develop interdisciplinary approaches and targeted trainings for behavior management in the school and family context. In this context, this case study aims to provide a concrete example of the application of ABA principles in an Albanian preschool environment, to present a model of the structure of the FBA and the Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP), and

to highlight the importance of involving educators and parents for sustainable and effective support.

## **Methodology**

This is a qualitative case study, based on direct intervention with a 5-year-old child, with advanced language development but with pronounced challenging behaviors, included in a preschool environment for a 3-month period (January–April 2025).

### *Participant*

“T” is a five-year-old boy enrolled in a private preschool class of 12 children. He displayed advanced language skills, but had significant difficulties with remaining emotionally stable and social interaction. The most common behaviors included yelling, physical aggression, disobedience, destruction of materials, and difficulty playing with others. “T” did not have a formal diagnosis at the time of the intervention, but parents and educators described behaviors consistent with disorders such as ADHD and social communication disorders.

The educators collaborated to collect data using standardized instruments and to implement the behavioral intervention designed by the KODDI Development Center according to standard data-based methods.

### *Intervention*

At first, the Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) process was developed, which lasted 3 weeks and included data collection from three settings: classroom, clinic, and home. The FBA was then used to identify the main functions of problem behaviors (task avoidance, attention seeking, and object approach).

Based on the results of the FBA, a Behavior Intervention Plan was created, which included:

- Proactive strategies: Setting up the space, employing visual aids, alerting people to changes, and preparing emotionally.
- Instructing alternative functioning behaviors: such as asking for help or using clear words to avoid outbursts (through modeling, prompts, and positive reinforcement).
- Crisis management: de-escalation strategies (calm approach, avoiding intense contact, guiding to a quiet space).
- Training educators and parents

The child received individual ABA therapy 5 times a week from the psychologist who was also his therapist. He also participated in group therapy once a week. A structured collaboration model with educators was also applied, through direct instructions and monitoring of the implementation of the intervention in the classroom.

For the successful implementation of the plan, two training sessions (180 minutes each) were held with educators and parents:

- Session 1: Basic principles of ABA, behavioral functions and the importance of objective observation.
- Session 2: The role of the educator/parent in the implementation of the plan, the use of reinforcers, modeling and practical scenarios (role play). Participants received written materials and practical guidelines for implementation. In addition, an experienced ABA aide was included in the classroom 5 days a week throughout the intervention period to support the educators and ensure consistency in implementation (Lequia, Machalicek, & Rispoli, 2012).

## **Methodology Tools**

A range of tools designed to document child behavior and intervention effectiveness were used to collect and analyze data in this study. The tools that were selected were based on scientifically proven practices in the fields of behavior analysis and inclusive education.

### *Daily Behavior Observation Forms (Annex 1)*

A range of tools designed to document child behavior and intervention effectiveness were used to collect and analyze data in this study. These tools were selected based on scientifically proven practices in the fields of behavior analysis and inclusive education.

### *Checklist for targeted behaviors (Annex 2)*

The therapist used a standard checklist to monitor the targeted behaviors during the ABA intervention, such as: initiating verbal communication, using language to ask for help, following rules, and respecting boundaries during play. Assessment was done systematically during individual sessions and group activities, according to the principles of behavior-based assessment (Leaf et al., 2016).

### *Functional Behavior Analysis (FBA) (Annex 3)*

It was conducted through the basic behavioral assessment instrument by collecting information from educators and parents during direct classroom observations. Classroom educators contributed daily observations and completed short behavioral assessment forms. The goal was to identify the function of challenging behaviors, such as task avoidance, attention seeking, or accessing preferred stimuli. This process was based on functional behavioral assessment protocols recommended by the literature (O'Neill et al., 2015).

The VFS showed that T.'s behaviors occurred for:

- Attention seeking (e.g., yelling during teacher instructions),
- Task avoidance (e.g., refusing during structured activities),
- Accessing preferred objects (e.g., aggression toward peers while playing with toys).

### *Behavior intervention plan (BIP)*

Based on the results of the VFS, a personalized intervention plan was developed that included: positive reinforcement and a differential reinforcement of alternative behavior (DRA), the use of a token reward system, and functional communication training (FCT). The plan was implemented jointly by the ABA therapist, educators, and teaching assistant (Umbreit, Ferro, Liaupsin, & Lane, 2007).

### *Daily behavior tracking sheets*

Educators completed a daily behaviour tracking sheet that included:

- The frequency of the problematic behaviours (e.g., yelling, aggression, disobedience),
- Measuring the intensity on a 3-point scale (mild, moderate, severe),
- Contextual variables (activity, time, location),
- Notes on antecedents and responses.

These sheets allowed for continuous data collection and provided immediate feedback to the therapist and teaching assistant.

### *Tool for monitoring progress in social skills (Annex 4)*

A therapist-developed checklist, based on the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS), was used to assess weekly:

- Initiating and maintaining play with peers,
- Sharing and waiting in line,
- Following group instructions,
- Emotional self-regulation strategies.

This tool helped track social progress and generalization of skills from therapy to the classroom.

### *Weekly reflections and comments from educators*

The therapist and educators kept regular weekly logs to exchange information on the implementation of the intervention, difficulties encountered, and necessary adjustments. This method helped maintain a coordinated interdisciplinary approach, consistent with guidelines for comprehensive practice (Friend & Cook, 2013).

Educators kept a weekly reflection journal to:

- Record observations of changes in behavior,
- Express perceptions of the impact of the intervention,
- Describe difficulties in implementing strategies,
- Suggest adjustments in collaboration with the therapist.

These journals facilitated ongoing collaboration and triangulation of qualitative data.

## **Results**

After three months of intervention:

- Interruptive yelling was reduced from 8 episodes per hour to 2 per hour.
- Physical aggression decreased from 4–5 times per day to less than 1 time.
- Disobedience during structured activities was reduced by more than 60%.
- Spontaneous initiation of social play increased significantly.
- Functional communication increased from 20% to 75% of opportunities.

Educators reported improvement in understanding and managing behavior. The presence of the teacher assistant brought calm and predictability to the child in the classroom environment

This study highlights the importance of a structured and comprehensive approach to the management of challenging behaviors. In a reality like Albania, where scientific approaches to behavior management are not yet integrated into the training that is needed and the professional development of teachers, the benefits of evidence-based interventions are evident.

The study highlights the urgent need to develop detailed training modules in ABA and behavior management for preschool educators, as well as to create sustainable support programs for parents. Implementing a plan based on functional behavior analysis significantly improves behavior and helps the child interact more positively with the environment.

Educators who receive training in ABA feel more confident and better prepared to face challenging situations in the classroom. Parents who are included in the intervention plan report a decrease in problematic behaviors at home, favoring the generalization of positive behaviors.

## Limitations

This case study focuses on several important limitations related to the Albanian context that affect the effective implementation of ABA therapy and the control of challenging behaviors in inclusive preschool settings.

Firstly, one ongoing issue with identifying and implementing evidence-based interventions is the absence of organized training for educators in the field of applied behaviour analysis (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2020). This often leads to the misunderstanding of children's behaviour and the usage of incorrect or punitive strategies.

Secondly, the youngster had access to a specialised facility and an ABA-trained therapist when the successful intervention was carried out, something that not many Albanian families can afford. This indicates inequality in access and the need to expand public services for children with special needs. Third, the success of the intervention was closely linked to the inclusion of an assistant teacher with ABA training, a position that is currently not very clear in the Albanian public preschool system. This indicates the need to create formal structures for assistant teachers trained in behavior management, mandatory professional training or standardization of working methods, which directly affects the quality of support for children with challenging behaviors or special needs. In this case, the need for a specially trained assistant teacher and for close collaboration with the therapist emerged as a key element for the success of the intervention. as part of

inclusive education policies. Third, the lack of systematic assessment and progress monitoring mechanisms in public schools hinders the early identification of children with challenging behaviors and the timely implementation of appropriate interventions.

Another limitation is the inadequacy of formal early diagnosis and multidisciplinary clinical assessment. In Albania, kids are sometimes tested late, or their parents don't want to get professional treatment because of stigma or because they can't get to the right resources. This phenomenon contributes to the delay in intervention and the further reinforcement of preventable challenging behaviors.

Finally, the lack of detailed ABA training modules in university training programs for preschool educators and the lack of structured cooperation between educational institutions and therapeutic centers constitute another critical gap that needs to be addressed.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This case study provides concrete evidence that the application of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy and combined with a well-structured Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) and training for educators and parents, can bring about tangible improvements in the behavior and social functioning of a child with advanced language development but challenging behavior. The limitation of behavioral outbursts, improved social interaction and learning environment, demonstrate the effectiveness of evidence-based interventions even in a resource-poor context such as Albania. The results show that the involvement of educators and parents in all phases of the intervention is an important component for the success that is required and sustainability of behavior changes (Koegel et al., 2014; Lucyshyn et al., 2007). The implementation of FBA and BIP not only helps in behavior management, but also increases the awareness and competence of professionals working with children with special needs. According to Sugai and Simonsen (2012), approaches based on the function of the behavior are more effective than traditional punitive approaches.

However, structural challenges, such as the lack of formal and professional training and the lack of ongoing support, continue to hinder the effective implementation of ABA interventions in Albanian preschool settings.

The study offers the following key recommendations for educational practice and policy:

Develop training modules in ABA for preschool educators, which include topics such as the functions of behavior, the use of positive reinforcement, and de-escalation strategies (Horner et al., 2005).

Integrating functional behavioral assessment (FBA) and BIP into everyday

teaching practices, through interdisciplinary collaboration between psychologists, therapists, and teaching staff.

Involving parents in planning and implementing interventions, to increase the sustainability and generalization of desired behaviors across settings (Lucyshyn et al., 2007).

Creating a sustainable support structure in schools, through the inclusion of ABA-trained teaching assistants to help implement the plan and support educators.

Drafting national policies that require and support the implementation of evidence-based interventions in educational institutions for children with challenging behaviors.

In conclusion, managing challenging behaviors requires more than the will of educators — it requires training, structure, collaboration, and institutional commitment. This study contributes to the Albanian literature with a model of successful practice that can be reproduced and further developed in other preschool education contexts.

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**Annex 1**

**Daily Behavior Observation Sheet**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Observer: \_\_\_\_\_

Setting:  School  Home  Therapeutic Center  Else: \_\_\_\_\_

Target Behavior: \_\_\_\_\_

**Observation Table by Schedule**

Time	Activity	Observed Behavior	Behavior Description	Antecedent	Consequence	Intensity (1–5)	Duration
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**Behavior Frequency Tracking (Optional)**

Target Behavior	Counting	Notes
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**ABC Data Collection (Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence)**

Time	Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence	Notes
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(What happened before the behavior?)      (What happened exactly?)      (What happened after?)

**Other notes /Humor/jokes/Progressobserved**

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Observer's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Total Observation Time: \_\_\_\_\_mins

Annex 2

**List of targeted behaviors**

Based on the description of a 5-year-old child who has verbal skills above his age, but who exhibits challenging behaviors such as: excessive insistence, avoidance, refusal, tantrums, aggression and destructive behavior, as well as difficulties in maintaining social relationships, an adapted list of target behaviors (based on Leaf et al., 2016) has been constructed below, which reflects the child's individual developmental priorities and current needs.

**List of Target Behaviors for the 5-year-old Child**

<b>Field</b>	<b>Target Behavior</b>	<b>Achieved</b>	<b>In Progress</b>	<b>To be developed</b>
<b>1.Emotional Regulation</b>	Identifies own emotions (e.g., "I am angry")	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Uses learned strategies for calming down (e.g.,	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	breathing, rest, visual cards)			
	Follows routines to recover from emotional outbursts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>2.Functional Behavior</b>	Seeks help or rest instead of rejection/aggression	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Follows instructions without outbursts or avoidance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Interrupts destructive behavior when asked	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>3.Social Skills</b>	Takes turns in play or conversation with others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Follows rules of play with other children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Expresses positive interest in peers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Understands the reactions of others and adjusts behavior	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>4.Pragmatic</b>	Uses appropriate language to resolve conflicts			
<b>Communication Skills</b>	verbally	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Follows conversational exchanges in a logical order	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Interrupts when asked and listens to the interlocutor	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>5.Cognitiv Flexibility</b>	Follows changes in routine without explosive behavior	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Accepts when an activity is over (without insisting or exploding)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Adapts to new demands in a group setting	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>6.Self-directed behavior</b>	Follows simple daily structures without constant supervision	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Identifies inappropriate behavior after an episode

Reflects on the consequences of aggressive behavior



**Self-directed behavior:**

- Check (✓) the appropriate column based on periodic assessments.
- This list can be used to build personalized goals in an ABA or Individual Educational Plan (IEP).
- Can be integrated with visual strategies, emotion maps, functional communication, and interventions for challenging behaviors.

**Annex 3**

**Individualized Behavior Intervention Plan (IBSP)**

Child's name: T.

Age: 5 years old

Plan start date:

Drafted by: Name of KODDI Development Center supervisor

Plan participants: ABA therapist, educators, assistant teacher, parents.

**Description of problematic behaviors**

Behavior	Description of behavior	Frequency / Context of occurrence
<i>Rejection</i>	Rejects verbal and academic requests, displays avoidance behavior (sitting on the floor, withdrawing into oneself)	During transitions and new tasks
Tantrums	Crying loudly, screaming, hitting self or objects	When a favorite activity is interrupted
Aggressive Behavior	Hitting or kicking, pushing children or adults	Under conditions of frustration or social interference

Insistent Behavior	Constantly asks for an action/game to be repeated; does not accept change	When there is a change in routine or structured activity
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## b. Functional Behavior Analysis (FBA)

Suspected functions of the behaviors:

- Avoidance of demands
- Seeking order/structure
- Emotional self-regulation
- Seeking access to preferred activities

### Positive behavior goals (target behaviors)

Target Behavior	Description	Duration
Following directions on the first try	Responds to simple requests within 5 seconds without protest	3 months
Using phrases to ask for help or a break	“Help me,” “Can I take a break?” instead of refusal or aggression	2 months
Tracking transitions with the help of a visual calendar	Switches from one activity to another without outbursts	6 weeks
Chooses ways to self-regulate	Uses calming strategy box (breathing, stress ball, coloring) Follows simple game rules and takes turns	2 months
Collaborates in play with a peer for 5 minutes	Uses calming strategy box (breathing, stress ball, coloring) Follows simple game rules and takes turns	3 months

## **c. Applicable Interventions and Strategies**

### **Proactive Interventions**

- Visual daily schedule and clear structuring of transitions
- 1 minute warnings before each activity change
- Establishing positive classroom rules in visual form
- Visual aids for emotional regulation (emotion cards)

### **Instructional Interventions:**

- Functional communication training
- Role-play for social interaction- Emotional expression through painting or cards

### **Corrective Interventions:**

- Ignoring non-threatening behavior
- Use of supervised “Time-In”
- Reviewing behavior after outburst

## **Reinforcers**

Reinforcer Type	Examples	Frequency
Social	Verbal praise, hug, applause	After each target behavior
Concrete	Coloring, playing with favorite toy	5 minutes after goal achievement
Activity	Resting in the quiet corner, listening to music	After completing task

## **d. Monitoring and Evaluation**

Monitoring tools: Daily behavior log, behavior frequency chart, monthly ABA assessments

## **e. Parental Participation**

- Parents will be trained to implement similar strategies at home

- Weekly communication with therapist for updates and consistency
- Guidance provided for use of self-regulation strategies in the family

#### Annex 4

### CHECKLIST – ASSESSMENT OF SOCIAL SKILLS AND PROBLEM BEHAVIORS

(Based on SSIS – Social Skills Improvement System)

#### General information:

Child's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of assessment: \_\_\_\_\_

Evaluator: \_\_\_\_\_

Evaluation period: \_\_\_\_\_

Explanation of the rating scale:

Value	Description
0	Never
1	Rarely
2	Sometimes
3	Often
4	Always

#### I. POSITIVE SOCIAL SKILLS

Nr.	Ability	Description	Evaluation (0–4)
1	Greetings others	Uses “hello”, “goodbye”	___
2	Follows instructions	Responds to requests without objection	___
3	Waits for turn	Respects turn to speak/play	___
4	Follows rules	Does not change the rules of the game	___
5	Shows empathy	Responds to the	___

		feelings of others	
6	Expresses frustration verbally	Instead of physical/verbal aggression	___
7	Collaborates in a group	Participates in a positive manner	___
8	Asks for help appropriately	No yelling or aggression	___
9	Accepts correction	Responds well to “no”	___
10	Manages emotions	Controls outbursts/emotions	___

## II. PROBLEMOUS BEHAVIOR

Nr.	Behavior	Description	Evaluation (0–4)
1	Refuses tasks/instructions	Refuses to participate	___
2	Insistent behavior	Rigidly insists	___
3	Aggressive behavior	Hits, pushes, screams	___
4	Avoidance	Withdraws from activity, ignores	___
5	Emotional outbursts	Episodes of crying, screaming, etc.	___
6	Interrupts others	Interferes in communication without turn	___
7	Inappropriate language	Insults, negativity	___
8	Leaving without permission	Leaves place without warning	___
9	Self-harming behavior	(If displayed)	___
10	Verbal manipulation	Uses strategies to avoid	___

### III. Additional Comments/Observations

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

### IV. Summary

Skills that have shown improvement:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Areas requiring further intervention:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Next assessment date: \_\_\_\_\_

