

LIGHTHOUSE FREE PARENT GUIDE

# ABA vs. Montessori vs. Both

How to think about therapy, education, peer modeling —  
and the timeline that serves your child best.

*Guiding families from diagnosis to thriving*

## They're Not Competing — They Serve Different Purposes

One of the most common questions parents ask is whether ABA therapy or a Montessori environment is “better.” The honest answer: they aren’t alternatives. ABA is clinical therapy that builds specific skills. Montessori is an educational philosophy and environment. Many children eventually benefit from both — in the right order, at the right time.

|                   | ABA Therapy                                                           | Montessori                                                               |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>What it is</b> | Clinical, data-driven therapy targeting specific developmental skills | Child-led educational philosophy focused on independence and exploration |
| <b>Best for</b>   | Communication, behavior, daily living skills, school readiness        | Independence, sensory learning, peer modeling from verbal children       |
| <b>Structure</b>  | Individualized therapy plans with measurable goals                    | Prepared environment, mixed-age classrooms, self-paced work              |
| <b>Funding</b>    | Typically covered by insurance with an autism diagnosis               | Private tuition (varies widely by school)                                |
| <b>Peers</b>      | Other children in therapy, varying ability levels                     | Typically developing children, often strong language models              |

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## Why Intensive ABA Often Comes First

The early window matters

Ages 3–6 are the most critical window for brain development and language acquisition. When a clinical team recommends intensive hours early, think of it as investing heavily upfront so your child can thrive more independently later. Many children who complete intensive early ABA go on to mainstream or Montessori classrooms — that can absolutely be your child's story.

*Intensive now does not mean intensive forever. Hours typically reduce as skills grow.*

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## The Peer Environment Question

The concern every thoughtful parent has

Parents often worry: if most peers in therapy have higher support needs than my child, will that slow their progress? It's a fair question. Children do learn from modeling — watching peers slightly ahead of them. This is exactly why a Montessori environment full of verbal, typically developing children can be powerful for language growth later. Ask your child's clinical team directly how children are grouped, and how much of the day is one-on-one.

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## Questions for Your BCBA

Planning the transition timeline

- **At what point would you consider reducing weekly hours — and what milestones trigger that conversation?**

*You want a roadmap, not an open-ended commitment.*

- **Could a Montessori or mainstream environment alongside reduced hours work for my child in the future?**

*Get their clinical opinion on peer modeling for YOUR child specifically.*

- **How will we know my child is ready — what skills matter most for a classroom transition?**

*Readiness is about skills like transitions, group instructions, and communication — not a birthday.*

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## Questions for a Montessori School

Vetting the next environment

- **Have you had autistic children in your primary program before — and how did it go?**

*Experience matters. You want a school that has done this, not one figuring it out on your child.*

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■ **How do teachers support children with different learning needs within the Montessori framework?**

*Montessori is naturally individualized — but ask for specifics, not philosophy.*

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■ **Can we do a classroom observation and a trial visit before enrolling?**

*Watching the classroom in action tells you more than any brochure.*

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■ **Are you able to coordinate with my child's therapy team during the transition?**

*The handoff between intensive therapy and school works best as a partnership.*

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*“It was never ABA or Montessori.  
It's ABA when they need building, Montessori when they're ready to bloom —  
and a parent wise enough to know the season.”*

— With love, from parents who've been there

This guide is free. Share it with any family who needs it.