Starting preschool or kindergarten is a big step for every child. New friends, a new classroom, games, and lessons can be exciting for some, but for kids with autism and other sensory disorders, so many new experiences can be hard to handle. These children often need a little extra help.

Many parents are turning to Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy to give their children the skills to succeed at school.

According to a study conducted by the Center for Autism and Related Disorders, ABA has been proven to help children with autism—when treated for two or more years, beginning before the age of five—develop age-appropriate behavior, communication, and social skills. ABA therapy has also been endorsed for individuals with autism by the American Association of Pediatrics.

**Milestones and Expectations**

Children typically start preschool at age three and kindergarten at age five. However, children on the spectrum may not naturally learn the skills they need to meet these milestones, and sending a child to school before he or she is ready can create unexpected challenges.

Children with autism often have difficulty socializing with other kids, which can result in being excluded.

The noise and bustle of a classroom can be distracting, especially to children who have a hard time focusing. They may fall behind academically. Listening may be difficult, and a child who doesn’t understand instructions might get frustrated and act out, or run away.

Individual therapy tailored to each child’s unique abilities and challenges can usually address these issues and more to help children with autism get ready to succeed in school.

**School Day Expectations**

A typical school day requires a surprising number of behaviors. For example, kindergartners need to put on their jackets and backpacks, eat a snack, and use the toilet. They need to respond to their names, follow multi-step instructions and sit in a chair long enough to complete a task, in addition to learning how to share, take turns, play cooperatively, and make requests to teachers.

For children with autism, mastering these skills works best when each is broken into small steps and there is plenty of practice and positive reinforcement. This is why it’s so important to start preparing kids for school as early as possible and provide as much therapy each week as possible. Children on the spectrum need time to learn how to sit in a chair for 30 seconds and build up to 15 minutes. They often need help to learn how to play next to other children and build up to sharing and taking turns.
Get-Ready-for-School Therapy
In-home ABA therapy can help prepare children with autism for school. During this therapy, a board-certified behavior analyst (BCBA) first comes to your home to meet your child, assess his or her abilities and needs, and discuss goals. Then the BCBA designs a plan and a therapist works with your child at home.

The program might also include trips to places that are similar to school. Going to the library is a great way to practice story-time and sitting in a circle with other kids. Heading to the playground offers a chance to get used to the noise of children playing.

The therapist continually measures results to make sure the plan is effective and adjusts it as your child gains skills. He or she will also teach you how to work with your child for greater progress.

It’s important to understand that ABA focuses solely on helping a child learn how to behave appropriately in a school setting. It does not teach any academic skills.

Ongoing Therapy, Ongoing Growth
Most parents continue therapy once their child starts preschool or kindergarten. This can help a child prepare for new experiences and reinforce desirable behaviors.

ABA therapists cooperate with your child’s teachers and Individual Education Plan (IEP) team to address changing needs. If your son or daughter is struggling with toilet training or staying focused on tasks, the therapist will work on those skills.

The Big Goal: Learning
An early start and intensive therapy can make all the difference in helping your child learn the essential skills they need for preschool, kindergarten, and beyond. Having the skills to navigate school and participate in the classroom is the foundation for an even more important goal: helping your child get ready to learn.

A child who can sit still, follow directions, listen, and ask questions is ready to learn and ready to succeed at school.