

## **The Case for Center-Based IBHS**

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Access to Intensive Behavioral Health Services (IBHS) is dwindling, and recent trends regarding IBHS center-based services will only serve to deepen the lack of access and choice for families in the autism spectrum disorder (ASD) community. Approximately 1 in 36 children in Pennsylvania are diagnosed with ASD, and research proves that early, intensive intervention is critical to supporting a child's development. Delays in treatment often lead to worsening problem behaviors, limited communication abilities, and missed developmental milestones. These delays will inevitably result in higher long-term costs for a system already lacking sustainable funding. Center-based services provide a controlled, distraction free setting for children to receive the intensive intervention that they need to transition successfully into natural environments.

As part of a full continuum of ABA care, guaranteed by the Sonny O. v. Dallas settlement, center-based ABA programs are uniquely designed to meet each child's needs, offering a therapeutic environment for children to receive intensive therapy. Structured, focused environments allow for children to progress rapidly due to the high therapeutic density, with evidence-based and specialized care. As a result, children in center-based ABA programs acquire skills at nearly double the rate compared to those in home-based care. Centers allow for children to increase functional communication, reduce maladaptive behaviors, and build critical life skills, preparing them for successful transitions, empowering them to thrive within their communities.

Center-based services have been under more intense scrutiny by the state than any other children's services since their implementation in 2019. The State's position that these services create an unnatural learning environment stands contradictory to the research and outcomes. These actions have also impacted funding and program expansion efforts by providers serving children who fall under Medicaid. It has been reported that denials for IBHS services make up nearly half of all service denials by the PA HealthChoices Behavioral Health Managed Care Organizations. The need for IBHS services is so great, and the access pathways are so narrow, it stands as the most denied mental health service request in the Medicaid space.

Center-based ABA services are critical for children with complex needs that cannot be addressed in other settings, and their place in the IBHS continuum remains a critical piece to the overall service offering of the program. There are some regional IBHS program adaptations that are being implemented which seek to integrate childcare and IBHS center-based services. Given the circumstances of the current IBHS landscape, alternative thinking might be needed to reframe the treatment nexus, but it should not come at the expense of clinically-proven center-based treatment models.

There are several key distinctions between center-based ABA programs and basic child care. ABA is a professional medical service that is provided in a health care setting, which is governed by health care laws and standards, and the services are provided by licensed and certified professionals trained to provide these evidence-based practices. These centers operate with clinical oversight, structured treatment plans, and data-driven interventions to support children's developmental progress.

If there is a future strategy in mandating OCDEL daycare center licensing for IBHS providers, it would add regulatory and administrative burden to center-based programs, which is costly and will reduce their ability to provide life-changing care to children at a time when access is already limited. Additionally, each program serves a specific population of children; some with divergent physical and behavioral health needs. The act of combining these programs has the potential to lessen their individual effectiveness.

In summary, it is essential to ensure that ABA center-based services remain a viable treatment option for children and families in accordance with the settlement stipulations of *Sonny O. v. Dallas*, and in conjunction with the 55 PA Code Chapters 1155 and 5240. Please contact [Emma Sharp](#) with any questions.