ABC data sheet for direct support professionals

A record of what happened just before, what the person did or said, and what happened right after, for the person's behavior support professional or clinician to read. You record; they read the pattern. Your supervisor fills in the header before staff use this sheet. During an episode, follow the person's crisis plan and your organization's procedures, and fill in the sheet when it is safe.

Header: filled in once for each sheet

Person supported	
Program or house	
Behavior support professional or clinician who reads this sheet	
What the plan asks staff to record	
Dates this sheet covers	

Your supervisor writes the behaviors to record, in observable words, from the person's plan or from the professional. Staff record; they do not write that line.

ABC card 1

Date (with the year)	
Time, start to end (AM or PM)	
Setting (where, what was going on)	
Who was present	
A. Just before what happened, not why	
B. What the person did or said what you saw and heard; their words in quotes	
C. Right after what people did and said, what changed	
How long, how many times	
What you did not see	☐ just before ☐ right after
Recorded by (name, signature, date, time)	

ABC card 2

Date (with the year)	
Time, start to end (AM or PM)	
Setting (where, what was going on)	
Who was present	
A. Just before what happened, not why	
B. What the person did or said what you saw and heard; their words in quotes	
C. Right after what people did and said, what changed	
How long, how many times	
What you did not see	☐ just before ☐ right after
Recorded by (name, signature, date, time)	

ABC card 3

Date (with the year)	
Time, start to end (AM or PM)	
Setting (where, what was going on)	
Who was present	
A. Just before what happened, not why	
B. What the person did or said what you saw and heard; their words in quotes	
C. Right after what people did and said, what changed	
How long, how many times	
What you did not see	☐ just before ☐ right after
Recorded by (name, signature, date, time)	

ABC card 4

Date (with the year)	
Time, start to end (AM or PM)	
Setting (where, what was going on)	
Who was present	
A. Just before what happened, not why	
B. What the person did or said what you saw and heard; their words in quotes	
C. Right after what people did and said, what changed	
How long, how many times	
What you did not see	☐ just before ☐ right after
Recorded by (name, signature, date, time)	

ABC card 5

Date (with the year)	
Time, start to end (AM or PM)	
Setting (where, what was going on)	
Who was present	
A. Just before what happened, not why	
B. What the person did or said what you saw and heard; their words in quotes	
C. Right after what people did and said, what changed	
How long, how many times	
What you did not see	☐ just before ☐ right after
Recorded by (name, signature, date, time)	

The time-of-day page

Tally one mark in the box for each episode that started in that hour, on that date. Draw a line through an hour when the person was away. Your supervisor and the professional decide who fills in which hours, so a blank box means the same thing to everyone who reads the sheet. The professional reads the pattern; you only fill it in.

Date (month/day)														
Day of the week														
6 AM to 7 AM														
7 AM to 8 AM														
8 AM to 9 AM														
9 AM to 10 AM														
10 AM to 11 AM														
11 AM to 12 PM														
12 PM to 1 PM														
1 PM to 2 PM														
2 PM to 3 PM														
3 PM to 4 PM														
4 PM to 5 PM														
5 PM to 6 PM														
6 PM to 7 PM														
7 PM to 8 PM														
8 PM to 9 PM														
9 PM to 10 PM														
10 PM to 6 AM														

Where this comes from: Touchette, MacDonald and Langer, 1985. “A scatter plot can make patterns of responding identifiable,” the authors write. The sheet is how you record; the professional reads the pattern. The hour rows and the tally marks are ours.

FOR NEW STAFF AND THE PEOPLE WHO TEACH THEM

Write what you saw, not what you think

Each rule names its source; the example pairs, the camera test and the worked example are ours.

The camera test (ours)

Could a camera have recorded what you wrote? A camera can record a hand hitting a table, a voice saying “No more!” and the time on a clock. It cannot record “angry,” “bored,” “manipulative” or “wanted attention.” Those are conclusions. Leave them to the professional who reads the sheet.

Who does what

You, the DSP: record	You write what you saw and heard, in the order it happened, as soon as it is safe, and you sign it. You tally the episode on the time-of-day page. (ICI Frontline Initiative, 2004; Washington DSHS, Module 6)
Your supervisor or training lead: set it up	Gets the behaviors to record, the dates and where the sheet goes from the person’s behavior support professional, writes them in the header, teaches the wording, and reads sheets for wording only. This role is our design; the Barton Lab and TRIAD forms show who reads the data, not who sets it up. ()
The behavior support professional or clinician: reads the pattern	Reads the sheets and the time-of-day page together and decides what they show and what, if anything, changes in the person’s plan. That part is theirs. (Touchette, MacDonald and Langer, 1985; Vanderbilt Barton Lab, ABC Data Collection Observation Cards; Vanderbilt TRIAD, Structured ABC Data Sheet)

Nine rules for recording

1. **Record what you saw and heard, and nothing more.** Bijou and colleagues list, among the ingredients of a descriptive field study, “defining and recording behavioral and environmental events in observable terms.” DSHS: information gathered is “objective, factual and given without emotions, opinions, or bias.” (Bijou, Peterson and Ault, 1968; Washington DSHS, Module 6)
2. **Write it as soon as it is safe to.** During an episode, follow the person’s crisis plan and your organization’s procedures; NADSP lists crisis prevention and intervention as its own competency area. Then write it down “as soon as you can,” DSHS says, and ICI: documenting “immediately (or soon as possible) after it occurs is optimal.” Never write something before it happens. (Washington DSHS, Module 6; ICI Frontline Initiative, 2004; NADSP Competency Areas)
3. **Say what happened just before as an event, not a reason.** The TRIAD sheet asks for what “happened immediately before.” “The vacuum started in the hall” is an event; “the noise bothered him” is a conclusion. (Vanderbilt TRIAD, Structured ABC Data Sheet)
4. **Describe the behavior so a person who was not there could picture it.** The Barton Lab cards ask: “Record what the behavior looked like.” Say what the body and voice did, how many times and about how long, as DSHS describes counting “how many times a behavior occurs” and “how long a behavior lasts.” (Vanderbilt Barton Lab, ABC Data Collection Observation Cards; Washington DSHS, Module 6)
5. **Put the person’s own words in quotation marks.** It keeps your wording out of theirs. This is our practice; the wider principle is in NADSP’s Code of Ethics: “Use respectful and inclusive language that reflects each person’s preferences.” (NADSP Code of Ethics)
6. **Record what happened right after, including what you and others did.** The TRIAD sheet asks for what “happened immediately after.” Your own words and actions, and other people’s, are part of what happened. Leave out how you think the person felt. (Vanderbilt TRIAD, Structured ABC Data Sheet)
7. **If you did not see it, say so.** Check the “did not see” box. The TRIAD sheet’s antecedent list includes “Unknown.” A guess written as a fact is harder to fix than a gap. (Vanderbilt TRIAD, Structured ABC Data Sheet)
8. **Keep opinions out. If your organization asks for yours, label it.** ICI describes objective documentation as “just the facts” and says that if you include an opinion, “always indicate that this is your opinion.” Its example: “it is the DSP’s opinion that Harry was frustrated, but it isn’t a fact.” (ICI Frontline Initiative, 2004)
9. **Record, and send it to the person who reads the pattern.** The TRIAD sheet leaves its scoring to its consultants: “Only TRIAD consultants should complete scores below.” The Barton Lab cards say to “Share your data with a behavior consultant, BCBA.” NADSP Competency Area 12 asks DSPs to be “aware of the requirements for documentation in his or her organization.” Your part is the record; keep it and send it as your organization’s policy says. (Vanderbilt TRIAD, Structured ABC Data Sheet; Vanderbilt Barton Lab, ABC Data Collection Observation Cards; NADSP Competency Areas)

What you saw, not what you think: ten examples

Made up for teaching; the names are invented.

Part of the card	Instead of	Write
Time	*It happened in the afternoon.*	Tuesday, March 2, 2027. It started at 4:25 PM and ended at 4:26 PM.
Who was present	*Everyone was there.*	Me (J. Okafor, DSP). L. and R. were in the living room. No visitors.

Part of the card	Instead of	Write
Before	*The noise triggered him.*	At 4:24 PM I started the vacuum in the hall. Andre was watching TV on the couch.
Before	*She was bored and wanted attention.*	At 2:00 PM I left the room to answer the phone. Keisha was at the table with a puzzle box.
Behavior	*Luis was aggressive.*	Luis hit the table with his open hand three times and said, “No more!” Another person who lives here (D.) was next to him. The hand did not touch D.
Behavior	*Rosa was non-compliant.*	I said, “It is time to brush your teeth.” Rosa stayed on the couch and kept watching TV. I asked again two minutes later. She said, “Not yet.”
Behavior	*Tom had a meltdown.*	At 6:05 PM Tom shouted, “I want to go home!” for about four minutes. He walked from the kitchen to the hall twice and sat on the floor by the front door.
After	*We ignored it and he calmed down.*	I stood by the sink and did not speak for two minutes. Andre stopped shouting at 4:26 PM and sat on the couch.
After	*I gave in and she settled.*	I handed Keisha the tablet. She stopped shouting and sat down. I said, “Ten minutes, then dinner.”
Reason	*He did it for attention.*	Leave the reason out. Write what happened: Sam called my name five times from the doorway while I was on the phone.

A worked example: three cards and a week

Made up for teaching: three ABC cards for one invented person, Andre, at an invented group home. The professional and the staff are invented. Andre's plan, as the example supposes, asks staff to record shouting and hitting a table, wall or furniture with a hand.

Header: Andre, Maple Street home. Professional: P. Nair, behavior support professional (invented). Dates: March 1 to March 7, 2027.

Worked example, ABC card 1

Date (with the year)	Tuesday, March 2, 2027
Time, start to end (AM or PM)	4:25 PM to 4:26 PM
Setting (where, what was going on)	Living room, after the van dropped him off at 4:05 PM.
Who was present	J. Okafor (DSP). L. and R. were in the room.
A. Just before what happened, not why	At 4:24 PM I started the vacuum in the hall, about 10 feet from the living room. Andre was watching TV on the couch.
B. What the person did or said what you saw and heard; their words in quotes	At 4:25 PM Andre shouted, "Too loud!" five times and hit the arm of the couch with his open hand three times.
C. Right after what people did and said, what changed	I turned the vacuum off. Andre said, "Thank you," and turned the TV up. L. moved to the kitchen.
How long, how many times	About 1 minute. One episode.
What you did not see	☐ just before ☐ right after
Recorded by (name, signature, date, time)	J. Okafor, March 2, 2027, 4:40 PM

Worked example, ABC card 2

Date (with the year)	Thursday, March 4, 2027
Time, start to end (AM or PM)	8:50 AM to 8:53 AM
Setting (where, what was going on)	Kitchen, breakfast.
Who was present	A. Reyes (DSP). L. at the table.
A. Just before what happened, not why	I said, "It is time to get your coat for the van." Andre was finishing his toast.
B. What the person did or said what you saw and heard; their words in quotes	Andre said, "No coat!" in a raised voice, twice, and hit the table once with his open hand.
C. Right after what people did and said, what changed	I stood by the door and waited. Andre stopped talking at 8:52 AM and picked up his coat at 8:53 AM.
How long, how many times	About 3 minutes. One episode.
What you did not see	☐ just before ☐ right after
Recorded by (name, signature, date, time)	A. Reyes, March 4, 2027, 9:10 AM

Worked example, ABC card 3

Date (with the year)	Friday, March 5, 2027
Time, start to end (AM or PM)	4:15 PM to 4:17 PM
Setting (where, what was going on)	Hallway outside the office.
Who was present	J. Okafor (DSP). No one else in the hall.
A. Just before what happened, not why	I was in the office and heard shouting at 4:15 PM. I did not see what happened just before.
B. What the person did or said what you saw and heard; their words in quotes	When I reached the hall, Andre was standing by the hall table. He hit the table twice with his open hand and shouted, “My phone!”
C. Right after what people did and said, what changed	I said, “Your phone is charging in the office.” I handed it to him at 4:17 PM. He stopped shouting and took it.
How long, how many times	About 2 minutes. One episode.
What you did not see	☒ just before ☐ right after
Recorded by (name, signature, date, time)	J. Okafor, March 5, 2027, 4:30 PM

The same week on the time-of-day page

Nine episodes in the week, one tally mark each. Cards 1, 2 and 3 are the Tuesday 4 PM, Thursday 8 AM and Friday 4 PM marks. You tally; the professional reads.

Date (month/day)	3/1	3/2	3/3	3/4	3/5	3/6	3/7							
Day of the week	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun							
6 AM to 7 AM														
7 AM to 8 AM	|													
8 AM to 9 AM				|										
9 AM to 10 AM														
10 AM to 11 AM														
11 AM to 12 PM						|								
12 PM to 1 PM														
1 PM to 2 PM														
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4 PM to 5 PM	|	|	|	|	|									
5 PM to 6 PM														
6 PM to 7 PM														
7 PM to 8 PM		|												
8 PM to 9 PM														
9 PM to 10 PM														
10 PM to 6 AM														

Before you hand in a sheet: a ten-point check

☐ Every card has the date with the year and the times with AM or PM.

☐ The setting and who was present are written.

☐ “Just before” says what happened, not why.

☐ The behavior is what a camera could record, with the person’s own words in quotation marks.

☐ “Right after” says what you and others did, and what the person did next.

☐ If you did not see the start or the end, you checked the box.

☐ Labels and reasons are out; any opinion is marked as yours.

☐ Each episode has a tally mark on the time-of-day page.

☐ You signed each card and wrote the time you wrote it.

☐ The sheet is kept where your policy says and goes to the professional on their schedule.

The wording is ours, built on the sources named in the rules.

For training leads: set it up and teach it in five steps

1. **Ask the person’s behavior support professional what to record.** Get in writing which behaviors to record, in observable words; whether to record every episode or only some hours; who fills in which hours; and where and how often the sheet goes to them. Type it into the header of the master copy. We leave it blank on purpose: it is the professional’s decision, for each person.
2. **Add the person and the people who read it.** In the master copy, write the person’s name or ID (as your policy says), the program, the professional’s name and where the sheet goes. Print a new sheet for each person and each period, or save a new file with the dates.
3. **Teach the nine rules with the ten example pairs.** Read each “instead of” line aloud and have staff rewrite it as what a camera could record before you show the “write” line.
4. **Practice with the worked example.** Run a two-minute made-up scene with two staff members. Everyone fills in a card from what they saw and heard, then compares cards: which words could a camera not record?
5. **Read sheets for wording, then send them on.** Each week read a few sheets and ask only: could someone who was not there picture it? Where not, ask the staff member what they saw. They add a dated, signed correction to their own card, as your policy says; never change someone else’s entry. Send the sheets to the professional on the schedule they gave you, and ask what was missing or unclear.

Where each part comes from

Read November 15, 2026. The field prompts, the rules' wording, the examples and the worked example are Special Learning's; the quoted lines are as published. None of these organizations has reviewed or endorsed this sheet. The fillable Word version is at the web address at the foot of each page.

1. **Washington DSHS, Module 6.** Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), "Module 6: Data Collection & Goal Tracking," a training module on writing down what you see (it points readers to the state's Developmental Disabilities Administration IISP training manual). https://dshs.wa.gov/media/4735/download?inline=
2. **Vanderbilt TRIAD, Structured ABC Data Sheet.** Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, TRIAD, "Structured ABC (Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence) Analysis" data sheet, 2018, adapted from B. A. Iwata (1996). https://vkc.vumc.org/assets/files/emails/TRIAD/EI/05_summer_2018/Structured-ABC-Data-Sheet.pdf
3. **Vanderbilt Barton Lab, ABC Data Collection Observation Cards.** Vanderbilt University, Barton Lab (IES grant R324A160086), "ABC's of Behavior: Antecedents, Behavior, Consequences" and "ABC Data Collection Observation Cards," a parent-facing guide. https://cdn.vanderbilt.edu/vu-web/lab-wpcontent/sites/96/2020/02/06141842/ABC-Data-Collection.pdf
4. **Bijou, Peterson and Ault, 1968.** Sidney W. Bijou, Robert F. Peterson and Marion H. Ault, "A method to integrate descriptive and experimental field studies at the level of data and empirical concepts," Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 1(2), 175–191 (1968), abstract as posted at PubMed Central. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC1310995/
5. **Touchette, MacDonald and Langer, 1985.** Paul E. Touchette, Rebecca F. MacDonald and Susan N. Langer, "A scatter plot for identifying stimulus control of problem behavior," Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 18(4), 343–351 (1985), abstract as posted at PubMed Central. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC1308031/
6. **ICI Frontline Initiative, 2004.** Traci LaLiberte, "Doing Documentation 'Write!'," Frontline Initiative, Volume 5, Number 4 (2004), Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota. https://publications.ici.umn.edu/frontline-initiative/5-4/doing-documentation-write
7. **NADSP Competency Areas.** National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals (NADSP), The NADSP Competency Areas, Area 10: Crisis Prevention and Intervention and Area 12: Documentation, as published on nadsp.org. https://nadsp.org/resources/competency-areas/
8. **NADSP Code of Ethics.** National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals (NADSP), The NADSP Code of Ethics (revised 2026), tenets as published on nadsp.org. https://nadsp.org/resources/the-nadsp-code-of-ethics/

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