

Dear Members of the Human Services Committee,

My name is Najma Siyad. I am the mother of a bright and resilient 4-year-old child with autism. As an African immigrant raising my family in Dakota County, Minnesota, I have become a dedicated advocate—not just for my son but for countless other children and families navigating similar paths. My testimony today is deeply informed by my personal experiences, my commitment to social justice, and my belief in the need for equitable, effective systems to support families like mine.

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) has been a transformative tool for our family, helping my son overcome challenges and equipping us with the tools to support his growth meaningfully. With the guidance of a licensed psychologist and a dedicated team of professionals, my son has made remarkable progress. Through ABA, he has developed essential communication skills, self-regulation strategies, and greater independence—all of which have improved his quality of life and strengthened our family dynamic.

Parent education, a key aspect of ABA, has been invaluable in helping me understand and address my son's unique needs. I am especially grateful for the culturally responsive providers we have worked with, including professionals from the East African community. Their understanding of our cultural context has been instrumental in bridging clinical approaches with our family's values and traditions. However, I recognize that this level of cultural responsiveness is not yet available to all families in Minnesota, and expanding access to culturally competent care must be a priority.

It is concerning when singular narratives dominate the conversation about ABA, often disregarding the diversity of experiences within the autism community. As a Black mother raising a Black autistic child, I cannot align with claims that ABA is universally harmful. The challenges my child faces are compounded by systemic racism. When he stims in public, the risks extend beyond misunderstandings—they are risks to his safety. In such moments, he may be perceived not as a child deserving care but as a potential threat. This reality underscores the critical role of ABA in equipping children like mine with skills that enhance their safety and ability to thrive in a society that often marginalizes Black children with disabilities.

The discussion around ABA must reflect the diverse realities of families across Minnesota. Instead of abolishing ABA or shutting down autism centers, we should focus on improving the system to ensure it meets the needs of all families. ABA is not without flaws, but its potential to empower families and improve outcomes is immense. Efforts should be directed toward refining its ethical standards, enhancing cultural responsiveness, and expanding accessibility.

The Department of Human Services (DHS) plays a vital role in this process. Licensing and oversight should aim to strengthen autism services, not create barriers that disproportionately harm marginalized communities. Shutting down centers or imposing punitive restrictions will only further limit access for families who rely on these services. Licensing must be a collaborative process, ensuring accountability while providing the resources necessary for providers to deliver high-quality, culturally responsive care.

The progress I have witnessed in my own family affirms the value of ABA, and I want to see more families benefit from these services—not fewer. Instead of dismantling ABA, we should work together to build a system that prioritizes the needs of all Minnesota families, particularly those from underrepresented communities.

Thank you for considering my testimony. As a mother, advocate, and member of the East African immigrant community, I hope my perspective highlights the importance of improving ABA services for all families in Minnesota.

Sincerely,

Najma Siyad