

You don't have  
to be perfect.  
You just have to

**KEEP**  
*showing up.*



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**ONE SESSION.  
ONE DAY.  
ONE STEP AT A TIME.**



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A SUPPORTIVE GUIDE FOR NEW RBTs

# Dear New RBT, *You're Going To Be Okay*

*What I Wish Someone Told Me Before My First ABA Session*

Starting your first ABA session?

*Deep breath. You're going to be okay.*

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## SECTION 01

# First Things First

*Before you walk in, read this.*

You are about to start one of the most meaningful jobs in our field. You will be working directly with a human being — a child, a teen, an adult — who is learning to communicate, regulate, and navigate the world.

You do not need to be an expert today. You need to be **present, prepared, and willing to learn.** That's it.

### **Bring these to every session:**

- Your ID and any required badges
- A notebook and two working pens
- Water and a snack
- Closed-toe shoes and clothes you can move in
- The BIP and skill acquisition programs (if provided)
- Your BCBA's contact info saved in your phone

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## SECTION 02

# What If I Mess Up?

*“You will make mistakes. That is how every great RBT learns.”*

Mistakes are part of the process. The goal is not perfection — the goal is **safety, honesty, and growth.**

### **If something goes wrong:**

- Keep the client and yourself safe first
- Document what actually happened (not what you wish happened)
- Tell your BCBA the same day
- Ask what to do differently next time
- Move forward. Do not spiral.

Honesty protects your client, your license, and your career.

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## SECTION 03

# Bring a Notebook

A simple notebook is the single most underrated tool a new RBT can carry. Use it to capture what you cannot remember in the moment.

### Use your notebook for:

- Reinforcers the client actually likes
- Phrases the BCBA uses during overlap
- Behaviors you saw but were not sure how to code
- Questions to ask after session
- Words the client used spontaneously

**Do not** write client identifying information (full name, DOB, address). Use initials only. Treat the notebook like a clinical document.

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## SECTION 04

# What Should I Write Down?

**After every session, jot down:**

- What programs you ran
- What reinforcers worked and which fell flat
- Any behavior you were unsure how to handle
- Any prompt you used that was not in the protocol
- Questions for your BCBA
- One thing the client did well

***Five minutes of notes today will save you five hours of confusion next week.***

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## SECTION 05

# What Should I Collect During Session?

Your BCBA will tell you the exact data collection method for each program. Until then, focus on these basics:

### Common data types:

- **Frequency** — how many times a behavior occurred
- **Duration** — how long a behavior lasted
- **Latency** — time between instruction and response
- **Trial-by-trial** — correct, prompted, incorrect
- **ABC** — antecedent, behavior, consequence

If you are not sure what to take, take ABC data and notes. Then ask your BCBA.

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SECTION 06

# My First Session Priorities

*“Rapport first. Programs second. Data third.”*

**In your first session, focus on:**

- **Safety** — yours and the client's
- **Pairing** — become a source of fun and reinforcement
- **Listening** — to the client, the parent, the BCBA
- **Following the plan** — exactly as written
- **Asking questions** — there are no dumb ones

You are not expected to run a full program with fidelity on day one. You are expected to show up, stay safe, and build trust.

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SECTION 07

# The Biggest Mistake New RBTs Make

## *Pretending to know something they don't.*

It feels embarrassing to say “I don't know.” It is much worse to guess on a behavior plan, run a program incorrectly for two weeks, or document something you didn't actually observe.

### **Say these out loud often:**

- “Can you show me one more time?”
- “I want to make sure I'm running this correctly.”
- “I'm not sure — can I check with the BCBA?”
- “Can we review the BIP together?”

Asking questions is professionalism, not weakness.

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## SECTION 08

# Questions to Ask Your BCBA

### **Before your first session:**

- What is the client's primary mode of communication?
- What are the top reinforcers right now?
- What behaviors should I expect, and how do I respond?
- What does a safe response look like for escalation?
- What programs am I running today?
- How do you want me to document session notes?

### **Ongoing:**

- Am I running this program with fidelity?
- What should I do when the client refuses?
- How is my data collection looking?
- Is there anything I should be doing differently?

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## SECTION 09

# What To Do If You're Overwhelmed

Overwhelm happens to every new RBT. It does not mean you are wrong for the job. It usually means you care.

### **In the moment:**

- Breathe in for four, out for six
- Ground yourself — feet on the floor, hands on your notebook
- Keep the client safe. Pause the program if needed.
- Call or text your BCBA — that is what they are there for

### **After session:**

- Debrief with your BCBA or a trusted peer
- Eat. Hydrate. Move your body.
- Write down one thing that went well
- Sleep. Tomorrow is a new session.

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## SECTION 10

# Things I Wish Someone Told Me

*“Your first month is supposed to feel hard.”*

- You will not click with every client immediately. That's normal.
- Pairing can take days or weeks. Trust the process.
- A parent's stress is not a personal attack on you.
- Cancellations will happen. Build a financial buffer.
- Drive time, supervision, and prep time matter. Track them.
- You are allowed to advocate for better training.
- Burnout is real. Rest is part of the job.
- The clients you struggle with most often teach you the most.

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## SECTION 11

# From One Former RBT to Another

*“You don't have to be perfect. You just have to keep showing up.”*

I was a nervous new RBT once. I forgot programs. I cried in my car. I asked questions that felt “dumb.” I learned that the RBTs who become the strongest BCBA's, supervisors, and clinic directors are the ones who stayed curious, humble, and consistent.

**You are not expected to be perfect. You are expected to:**

- Show up prepared
- Stay safe
- Build rapport
- Take notes
- Ask questions
- Follow the plan
- Keep learning

That is enough. **You are enough.**

— *With you in this work, Spicy BCBA Institute*

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**Start prepared.**  
*Stay curious.*  
**Build confidence.**

***Important:** This educational resource is not a substitute for supervision, employer-specific training, client-specific treatment plans, BACB requirements, or clinical direction from your supervising BCBA.*

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