We Document What Actually Happened

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A practical guide to honest time records, session notes, and data in ABA

Why Your Documentation Matters So Much

Every session you run ends with a record. You enter the time. You write a note. You record the data. It can feel like routine paperwork at the end of a long day.

That record carries a lot of weight. The information you enter may become the basis for an insurance claim. Someone you will never meet may rely on your note to decide what was provided and what should be paid. A supervisor will rely on your data to make treatment decisions for a child.

So the guiding principle is simple:

"We don't document what was supposed to happen. We document what actually happened."

And underneath that principle is the most important idea in this whole series:

"The most important thing I want you to remember is that we must always be honest about what we do, what we observe, and what we document."

Honest documentation protects children, families, providers, and the public programs that pay for care. It also protects you.

Scheduled Time, Work Time, and Treatment Time

One of the most common places documentation goes wrong is time. Three kinds of time are easy to blur together, and they are not the same.

Scheduled time is what was planned. A session might be on the calendar from 9:00 to 12:00.

Work time is when you were on the clock as an employee. You might arrive early to set up materials, travel between clients, or finish paperwork after the child leaves. That is real work, and it matters for your paycheck.

Billable treatment time is the time when the service was actually delivered. This is the time that may be submitted on a claim.

Here is how that can look in practice. A session is scheduled for 9:00 to 12:00. The child arrives at 9:20 and leaves at 11:45. The treatment time is 9:20 to 11:45, even though the schedule said something else and even though you were working the whole morning.

A few practical rules follow from this:

- Record the actual date, time, duration, and nature of the service.
- Never document a session that did not occur.
- Never record time before the child arrived or after the session ended as though treatment happened.
- Do not record personal breaks or unrelated activities as direct treatment.
- Do not misrepresent who delivered the service. If someone else ran part of the session, the record should reflect that.
- Do not record two overlapping services as separately billable unless the applicable rules allow it. If you are unsure, ask your supervisor before you submit.

When in doubt, write down the real times and ask questions. Accurate times are always easier to work with than times that have to be explained later.

Writing Honest Session Notes and Data

A session note should give an objective picture of the treatment you delivered and how the child responded. A reader should be able to understand what happened in that session without having been there.

Good notes usually include:

- The interventions and activities you used
- How the child responded
- Progress you observed
- Challenges that came up
- Any significant events

Write what you saw and did. "Client engaged in 3 instances of elopement during transition from play to table work" tells the reader something real. Vague praise or vague complaints do not.

Some practices quietly undermine honest records, even when they feel harmless:

- **Inventing data.** If you did not run the trials, there is no data to record.
- **Copying forward.** Reusing last session's observations when they did not happen again creates a false record.
- **Polishing.** Describing a service more favorably than it really went makes the note inaccurate, even if every word sounds professional.

Data drives clinical decisions. If the data says a skill is mastered when it is not, the child may lose support they still need. Honest data is how supervisors take good care of the children in your program.

Hard Sessions Still Get Honest Notes

Some sessions do not go as planned. A child may be sick, upset, or not ready to work. Programs may get skipped. A session may end early. Behavior may be more intense than usual.

These sessions still need honest documentation. In fact, they may be some of the most important sessions to record clearly.

If something did not go as planned, say so. Note what you attempted, what the child did, and what changed. If a session ended early, record the real end time. If you could not run certain programs, do not record data for them.

A hard session written down honestly gives your supervisor useful information. It can reveal patterns, point to needed changes, and show a family what their child is really working through. A hard session written up to look smooth hides exactly the information the team needs.

For supervisors, this is worth saying out loud and often. Staff should feel safe reporting a rough session. If people fear that a difficult session reflects badly on them, they will be tempted to soften the record. A team that treats hard sessions as normal and useful information gets better data and better care.

When You Make a Mistake

Everyone who documents will eventually make an error. You might enter the wrong time, check the wrong box, or put a note in the wrong client's file.

An honest mistake is not automatically fraud. Fraud and false claims generally involve things like billing for services not provided, inflating service time, misrepresenting someone's qualifications, or knowingly using inaccurate documentation to support payment. Federal rules and the False Claims Act address this kind of conduct, and the sources below explain it in more detail.

Even so, mistakes still need to be fixed, and fixed promptly. A small error caught the same day is simple to correct. The same error left in place can end up on a claim.

Practical steps:

- When you notice an error, tell your supervisor or follow your organization's correction process right away.
- Correct the record openly. Do not quietly rewrite or delete a note to hide that it was wrong.
- Supervisors can help by responding to corrections calmly and thanking staff who catch them.

"We don't expect perfection. We expect honesty, attention to detail, and a willingness to correct mistakes."

Correcting a mistake is part of honest practice. It shows the system is working.

The Short Version

Before you submit any time entry, note, or data sheet, ask yourself one question: does this match what actually happened?

Record the real times. Describe the real session, including the hard parts. Enter only the data you collected. Fix mistakes as soon as you find them, and ask when you are not sure.

That steady habit protects the children you serve, their families, your organization, and you.

References

1. Electronic Code of Federal Regulations. 42 CFR Part 455, including § 455.2, definitions of fraud and abuse in Medicaid program integrity. https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-42/chapter-IV/subchapter-C/part-455

2. U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Division. "The False Claims Act." https://www.justice.gov/civil/false-claims-act

3. Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School. 31 U.S.C. § 3729, False claims. https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/31/3729

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