

NASET's HOW TO Series

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How to Conduct a Functional Behavior Assessment

CONDUCTING A FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIORAL ASSESSMENT

Identifying the underlying causes of behavior may take many forms; and, while the Amendments to IDEA advise a functional behavioral assessment approach (which could determine specific contributors to behavior), they do not require or suggest specific techniques or strategies to use when assessing that behavior. While there are a variety of techniques available to conduct a functional behavioral assessment, the first step in the process is to define the behavior in concrete terms. In the following section we will discuss techniques to define behavior.

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM BEHAVIOR

Before a functional behavioral assessment can be implemented, it is necessary to pinpoint the behavior causing learning or discipline problems, and to define that behavior in concrete terms that are easy to communicate and simple to measure and record. If descriptions of behaviors are vague (e.g., poor attitude), it is difficult to determine appropriate interventions. Examples of concrete descriptions of problem behaviors are:

PROBLEM BEHAVIOR	CONCRETE DEFINITION
Trish is aggressive	Trish hits other students during recess when she does not get her way
Carlos is disruptive	Carlos makes irrelevant and inappropriate comments during class discussion
Jan is hyperactive	Jan leaves her assigned area without permission Jan completes only small portions of her independent work Jan blurts out answers without raising her hand

It may be necessary to carefully and objectively observe the student's behavior in different settings and during different types of activities, and to conduct interviews with other school staff and caregivers, in order to pinpoint the specific characteristics of the behavior.

Once the problem behavior has been defined concretely, the team can begin to devise a plan for conducting a functional behavioral assessment to determine functions of the behavior. The following discussion can be used to guide teams in choosing the most effective techniques to determine the likely causes of behavior.

POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES

The use of a variety of assessment techniques will lead teams to better understand student behavior. Each technique can, in effect, bring the team closer to developing a workable intervention plan.

A well developed assessment plan and a properly executed functional behavioral assessment should identify the contextual factors that contribute to behavior. Determining the specific contextual factors for a behavior is accomplished by collecting information on the various conditions under which a student is most and least likely to be a successful learner. That information, collected both indirectly and directly, allows school personnel to predict the circumstances under which the problem behavior is likely and not likely to occur.

Multiple sources and methods are used for this kind of assessment, as a single source of information generally does not produce sufficiently accurate information, especially if the problem behavior serves several functions that vary according to circumstance (e.g., making inappropriate comments during lectures may serve to get peer attention in some instances, while in other situations it may serve to avoid the possibility of being called on by the teacher).

It is important to understand, though, that contextual factors are more than the sum of observable behaviors, and include certain affective and cognitive behaviors, as well. In other words, the trigger, or antecedent for the behavior, may not be something that anyone else can directly observe, and, therefore, must be identified using indirect measures. For instance, if the student acts out when given a worksheet, it may not be the worksheet that caused the acting-out, but the fact that the student does not know what is required and thus anticipates failure or ridicule. Information of this type may be gleaned through a discussion with the student.

Since problem behavior stems from a variety of causes, it is best to examine the behavior from as many different angles as possible. Teams, for instance, should consider what the "pay-off" for engaging in either inappropriate or appropriate behavior is, or what the student "escapes," "avoids," or "gets" by engaging in the behavior. This process should identify workable techniques for developing and conducting functional behavioral assessments and developing behavior interventions. When considering problem behaviors, teams might ask the following questions.

IS THE PROBLEM BEHAVIOR LINKED TO A SKILL DEFICIT?

Is there evidence to suggest that the student does not know how to perform the skill and, therefore cannot? Students who lack the skills to perform expected tasks may exhibit behaviors that help them avoid or escape those tasks. If the team suspects that the student "can't" perform the skills, or has a skill deficit, they could devise a functional behavioral assessment plan to determine the answers to further questions, such as the following:

- Does the student understand the behavioral expectations for the situation?
- Does the student realize that he or she is engaging in unacceptable behavior, or has that behavior simply become a "habit"?
- Is it within the student's power to control the behavior, or does he or she need support?
- Does the student have the skills necessary to perform expected, new behaviors?
- Does the student have the skill, but, for some reason, not the desire to modify his or her behavior?

Sometimes it may be that the student can perform a skill, but, for some reason, does not use it consistently (e.g., in particular settings). This situation is often referred to as a "performance deficit." Students who can, but do not perform certain tasks may be experiencing consequences that affect their performance (e.g., their non-performance is rewarded by peer or teacher attention, or performance of the task is not sufficiently rewarding).

If the team suspects that the problem is a result of a performance deficit, it may be helpful to devise an assessment plan that addresses questions such as the following:

- Is it possible that the student is uncertain about the appropriateness of the behavior (e.g., it is appropriate to clap loudly and yell during sporting events, yet these behaviors are often inappropriate when playing academic games in the classroom)?
- Does the student find any value in engaging in appropriate behavior?
- Is the behavior problem associated with certain social or environmental conditions?
- Is the student attempting to avoid a "low-interest" or demanding task?
- What current rules, routines, or expectations does the student consider irrelevant?

Addressing such questions will assist the IEP team in determining the necessary components of the assessment plan, and ultimately will lead to more effective behavior intervention plans. Some techniques that could be considered when developing a functional behavioral assessment plan are discussed in the following section.

Techniques for Conducting the Functional Behavioral Assessment

Indirect assessment. Indirect or informant assessment relies heavily upon the use of structured interviews with students, teachers, and other adults who have direct responsibility for the students concerned. Individuals should structure the interview so that it yields information regarding the questions discussed in the previous section, such as:

- In what settings do you observe the behavior?
- Are there any settings where the behavior does not occur?
- Who is present when the behavior occurs?
- What activities or interactions take place just prior to the behavior?
- What usually happens immediately after the behavior?
- Can you think of a more acceptable behavior that might replace this behavior?

Interviews with the student may be useful in identifying how he or she perceived the situation and what caused her or him to react or act in the way they did. Examples of questions that one may ask include:

- What were you thinking just before you threw the textbook?
- How did the assignment make you feel?
- Can you tell me how Mr. Smith expects you to contribute to class lectures?
- When you have a "temper tantrum" in class, what usually happens afterward?

Commercially available student questionnaires, motivational scales, and checklists can also be used to structure indirect assessments of behavior. The district's school psychologist or other qualified personnel can be a valuable source of information regarding the feasibility of using these instruments.

Direct assessment. Direct assessment involves observing and recording situational factors surrounding a problem behavior (e.g., antecedent and consequent events). An evaluator may observe the behavior in the setting that it is likely to occur, and record data using an Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence (ABC) approach. (Appendix A shows two examples of an ABC recording sheet.)

The observer also may choose to use a matrix or scatter plot to chart the relationship between specific instructional variables and student responses. (See Appendix B for examples). These techniques also will be useful in identifying possible environmental factors (e.g., seating arrangements), activities (e.g., independent work), or temporal factors (e.g., mornings) that may influence the behavior.

These tools can be developed specifically to address the type of variable in question, and can be customized to analyze specific behaviors and situations (e.g., increments of 5 minutes, 30 minutes, 1 hour, or even a few days). Regardless of the tool, observations that occur consistently across time and situations, and that reflect both quantitative and qualitative measures of the behavior in question, are recommended.

Data analysis. Once the team is satisfied that enough data have been collected, the next step is to compare and analyze the information. This analysis will help the team to determine whether or not there are any patterns associated with the behavior (e.g., whenever Trish does not get her way, she reacts by hitting someone). If patterns cannot be determined, the team should review and revise (as necessary) the functional behavioral assessment plan to identify other methods for assessing behavior.

Hypothesis statement. Drawing upon information that emerges from the analysis, school personnel can establish a hypothesis regarding the function of the behaviors in question. This hypothesis predicts the general conditions under which the behavior is most and least likely to occur (antecedents), as well as the probable consequences that serve to maintain it. For instance, should a teacher report that Lucia calls out during instruction, a functional behavioral assessment might reveal the function of the behavior is to gain attention (e.g., verbal approval of classmates), avoid instruction (e.g., difficult assignment), seek excitement (i.e., external stimulation), or both to gain attention and avoid a low-interest subject.

Only when the relevance of the behavior is known is it possible to speculate the true function of the behavior and establish an individual behavior intervention plan. In other words, before any plan is set in motion, the team needs to formulate a plausible explanation (hypothesis) for the student's behavior. It is then desirable to manipulate various conditions to verify the assumptions made by the team regarding the function of the behavior. For instance, the team working with Lucia in the example above may hypothesize that during class discussions, Lucia calls out to get peer attention. Thus, the teacher might make accommodations in the environment to ensure that Lucia gets the peer attention she seeks as a consequence of appropriate, rather than inappropriate behaviors. If this manipulation changes Lucia's behavior, the team can assume their hypothesis was correct; if Lucia's behavior remains unchanged following the environmental manipulation, a new hypothesis needs to be formulated using data collected during the functional behavioral assessment.