



# RTI Roundtable - Issue #18

## The Role of FBA in RTI<sup>2</sup>-B

By Cindy Widner

### Abstract

With the upcoming implementation of RTI<sup>2</sup>-B, it is imperative that educators understand the role of a functional behavior assessment in the process. One of the most controversial issues that arises within the RTI process is the responsibility of the implementation of components. The conflict stems from a lack of understanding, training, and direction in the FBA process. This article is intended to increase the understanding of who is responsible for conducting a FBA and how it can be done both as a formal and informal assessment.

*Keywords:* functional behavior assessment, formal, informal, responsibility

## The Role of FBA in RTI<sup>2</sup>-B

Picture this, if you would. Bobby is now spending his third afternoon in the office for punching Toby. Susie cut Carol's hair during art class. Josh stole Rick's lunch money again. Luke's mom forgot to give him his medicine for his ADHD, so he has been disruptive all day with talking and roaming around the classroom distracting his peers. Christian came in moody and eventually had an outburst of profanity toward the teacher. These are just some of the issues classroom teachers deal with on a daily basis. Even amongst all this chaos, teachers are expected to increase test scores and meet curriculum standards. How? Hopefully, this article can help answer this question.

Behavior is defined by dictionary.com (2017) as an observable, aggregate set of responses to external and internal stimuli. These actions can be either appropriate or inappropriate for the situation during which they exhibit themselves. Jim Wright, school psychologist and administrator (as cited in National Professional Resources, 2009), described behavior as a continuous stream because a person is always doing something. Behavior, whether positive or negative, usually serves a specific purpose and can stem from various sources. Some behaviors can be learned. Some may be due to a medical condition. Others, still, may be related to the context of the situation, such as setting events, antecedent events, and consequence events (Ogonosky & Mintsoulis, 2014). Since there are multiple reasons for student behavior, teachers need to know when and how to intervene and when to just observe. Teachers also benefit from knowing the student because at times, surface behaviors are the same, but the underlying reasons will vary (National Professional Resources, 2009).

Schools are complex environments where a compilation of knowledge, interests, cultures, personalities, and skills are meshed together within a unique community. Teachers are challenged to form and sculpt students academically and socially through effective and explicit instructional opportunities to promote and enhance student success. Reaching these goals is complex and complicated because of the diversity among learners through history, strengths, limitations, cultural influences (Sugai, 2017). This diversity can often turn into behavior problems. Historically, these problems were disciplined using punitive and reactive measures where rules were defined and violators were punished with negative consequences (Colvin, 2007).

Fifteen to 25% of all students have some type of behavior problem (Vaughn & Bos, 2009). Most of these misbehaviors are poor academic behaviors, attention problems, hyperactivity, aggressive behavior, withdrawn behavior, and bizarre behavior (Vaughn & Bos, 2009; National Professional Resources, 2009; PBIS World, 2012). Initially, the best way to improve on these behaviors is to begin with effective classroom instruction and management. Students need an environment where they feel accepted and respected. To improve behavior, the teacher needs to make data driven decisions, provide the necessary resources to students, increase instructional accountability, enhance quality instruction and classroom management through participation of professional developments, and enhance fidelity. More importantly, teachers need to make a connection with students by taking the time to get to know them.

Most often misbehavior occurs due to class interruptions, poor classroom management, transitions, or miscommunication (National Professional Resources, 2009). As Harry Wong (1991) stated, the first days of school can make or break a teacher. What a teacher does the first two to three weeks of school is critical in determining the performance level of the students. The effectiveness of a well-ordered classroom and positive expectations equal an effective classroom. The most successful classroom has well-defined and consistent discipline, procedure, and routines.

But, what happens when teachers' best efforts do not result in appropriate student behaviors? That is when RTI<sup>2</sup>-B comes into play. Behavior RTI is comprised and supported by the research model called Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) which aims at preventing inappropriate behavior by teaching and reinforcing appropriate behaviors (TN Dept. of Ed, 2015; PBIS World, 2012). It is a proactive approach to establish a "positive school climate, and create supportive environment for personal, social, and academic growth for students and staff" (p. 10, Colvin, 2007). A key component and assessment tool in behavior RTI is the functional behavior assessment (FBA), a systematic approach for identifying the purpose, or the function, of a behavior by investigating the preexisting factors (Zirkel, 2011; Gable, Park, & Scott, 2014).

As a formal assessment, a functional behavior assessment (FBA) needs to be completed to help move from the reactive-consequence-laden approach to the appropriate replacement behaviors. Information included within the FBA includes: how often the behavior occurs; where it occurs; who is present; a description of the environment; when does it occur; what maintains the behavior; how do the student and peers react to the consequences; what are strengths of the student; how will data be collected; and what has been used in the past that works and why did it work. (Ogonosky & Mintsoulis, 2014). Once a FBA is completed, a BIP (Behavior Improvement Plan) should be developed. This plan should be grounded from the data collected from the FBA. If it is not, success will not be an option. The BIP should include a list of possible reinforcers and negative reactionary consequences for undesired behaviors (Bohanon, McIntosh, & Goodman, 2017). Other information to include should be a family history report, medical records, psychological/psychiatric evaluation, educational assessments, previous behavior interventions and strategies and their effectiveness, disciplinary actions, and attendance records (Onogosky & Mintsoulis, 2014). The RTI<sup>2</sup>-B team should continue to progress monitor with data at the individual student level with all team members, including family, having input in the BIP (Ogonosky & Mintsoulis, 2014, TN Dept. of Ed., 2016; Bohanon, McIntosh, & Goodman, 2017).

A major question then posed is who is responsible for conducting the formal assessment of the FBA. Special education teachers will say general education. General education in turn will point to special education. What each needs to remember is that students are general education first; special education is just a supplementary program to give added assistance. It takes working together to solve a difficult problem such as behavior. An FBA can first be done as an informal assessment in the general education setting in Tiers 1 and 2, then as a formal assessment in Tier 3.

With RTI<sup>2</sup>-B's Tiers 1 and 2 generating in the general education setting, it can be said that the general education staff are the ones responsible for conducting the first informal, or indirect FBA. Components of the first FBA should include the "big six" of the ODR's (office discipline referrals), as described by Alvarez

and Filter (2012), which include: average referrals per day and per month, problem behavior, time of day, location, students, and motivation for the behavior. As Scott and Kamps (2007) stated, it needs to be understood that what is asked of the general education personnel needs to be reasonable. It is believed that the use of ODRs and indirect measures (defining of the problem; determination of the severity, and identification of the most appropriate time and conditions to do observations) to conduct a FBA is not an unreasonable task and needs very little if any training to complete. It should also be understood that the data collected are more valid when done by those more involved with the student (Scott & Kamps, 2007; Gable, Park, & Scott, 2014).

As Meyer and Behar-Horenstein (2015) found, many teachers indicated that they lacked the professional development skills, support, and resources necessary to effectively implement RTI. The researchers discovered that frustration stemmed from role uncertainty, process uncertainty, trial and error decision making, struggling students, and emotions. Not only were the teachers frustrated with the implementation but also the principal. Training is essential to promote not only the buy-in of the program, but also to encourage confidence in the ability to implement the program.

To help teachers with the data collection, Phillips (2017) established what she called the “Conducive Procedures”. First teachers should create an “In-Out Log”, a three-ringed binder where students sign in and out when leaving or entering the classroom. This helps with finding the times behaviors occur. Second, create a “Behavior Documentation Log”. This simply is a clipboard with a sheet with the rules, student names, dates, and comments. This creates a running record of the behavior, time, date, and consequence for the inappropriate behavior. These logs can then be shared with administrators, the RTI team, and parents in order to analyze the data so as to conduct an informal FBA.

Once a student enters into Tier 3, a more comprehensive FBA must be conducted. For this, training and tools to conduct an appropriate and effective FBA are a must. Training needed focuses on how to use the tools of informant assessment, direct observations, and experimental analysis to create a fitting behavior improvement plan (BIP). In this situation, Tier 3, it is best that trained professionals, such as counselors (regular or special education), school psychologists, or in more severe cases, clinicians, be the ones to conduct the assessment. Teachers are not equipped to complete the necessary components of the FBA. Literature and research supported that establishing a FBA includes standardized methods which only school psychologist and clinicians are trained to do. Outsiders who tried to conduct a FBA prohibited the findings from being valid (Scott & Kamps, 2007).

One of the best resources to utilize in difficult situations is counselors. As heard many times, counselors will dispel the perception that this is behavior problem, not counseling. Now that RTI is mandated in many states, school counselors are needed to take on leadership roles in the implementation of behavior RTI. The PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention Supports) incorporates on-going assessments and data collections and analyzation to drive decision-making and professional development. As fate would have it, counselors’ roles are also changing in the schools with the implementation of RTI<sup>2</sup>-B. However, as research has begun to show, they, too, feel unprepared to face the challenges that schools are facing with problem behaviors. Research results indicate that counselors also have little confidence in their ability to employ the leadership roles asked of them through RTI although they actually do have the skills to lead, advocate, and partner with peers. To aid in this dilemma, American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has outlined the components of the school counseling program and aligned them with the multi-tiered continuum and the counselors’ role (Pakrikakou, Ockerman, & Hollenbeck, 2016).

As evidence and literature emerge, it is appropriate to say that conducting a FBA is in fact everyone’s responsibility. More specifically, it is both the general education and special education place to conduct a FBA. It can be said that often times, teachers would rather revert to punishment or arbitrary contingencies rather than use school-based research because it is easier, although in many cases not very effective. As literature and research have proven, as cited in Gable, Park, and Scott (2014), function-based interventions have produced more positive outcomes than nonfunction-based interventions due to the fact that function-based interventions work to change the student’s behavior. Educators, counselors, and administrators need to step up to the plate and collaborate as a team if RTI<sup>2</sup>-B is going to work.

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Cindy Widner is a special education teacher with 21 years of experience in the field of education. Graduated from Lincoln Memorial University as Salutatorian with a Bachelor's of Science degree, she is currently working on her Ed.D in Curriculum and Instruction at Carson Newman University. She is also a published poetry author in *Great Poems of the Western World*. Ms. Widner was awarded the *Who's Who Among America's Teachers* twice and was also recognized as *Cambridge's Who's Who Honored Member* in 2008-2009. Ms. Widner currently resides in Tazewell, TN with her daughter.