

Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) Quick Guide

A Practical Framework for Psychologists, BCBAs, and School Teams

Purpose

A Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) identifies *why* a student's behavior occurs so that educators can design interventions that meet the same need in a more appropriate way. Without understanding function, behavior plans often fail because they treat symptoms instead of causes. This worksheet provides a step-by-step guide, data tools, and examples to help teams complete and apply FBAs that actually inform effective Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs).

Core Principles of FBA

1. **Behavior serves a function.** Every behavior communicates something—gain, escape, sensory, or attention.
 2. **Data reveals patterns.** Reliable data across time and settings uncovers triggers and reinforcers.
 3. **Hypotheses guide interventions.** An accurate “best guess” of why behavior occurs directs replacement skills and supports.
 4. **Collaboration is key.** Teachers, families, and service providers all contribute context.
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The 5-Step FBA Process

Step	Task	Questions to Ask	Tools/Examples
1. Define the Target Behavior	Write an observable, measurable description.	What exactly does the student <i>do</i> ?	“Throws paper, yells, and leaves seat.”
2. Collect Data Across Settings	Gather frequency, duration, antecedent, and consequence data.	When, where, and with whom does the behavior occur?	ABC charts, frequency logs
3. Identify Antecedents & Consequences	Find what triggers and maintains the behavior.	What happens before and after the behavior?	Antecedent matrix, scatterplot
4. Determine the Function	Analyze data for the purpose of the behavior.	What does the student get or avoid?	Hypothesis statement
5. Develop Hypothesis & Next Steps	Create a clear function-based summary statement.	How will we teach a replacement skill that serves the same function?	Link to BIP or SMARTIE goal

The Four Common Behavior Functions

Function	Description	Common Examples	Replacement Skill Focus
Attention	To gain social interaction from adults or peers.	Calling out, making jokes, seeking proximity.	Teach appropriate attention-seeking (raise hand, request check-in).

Escape/Avoidance	To get out of difficult or non-preferred tasks.	Leaving, shutting down, refusal.	Teach task negotiation, “help” requests, or break card use.
Tangible Gain	To access a preferred activity or item.	Taking items, demanding access.	Teach “my turn” requests, schedule for access, or token systems.
Sensory/Automatic	To meet internal sensory needs (stimulation or calming).	Rocking, humming, tapping, fidgeting.	Provide alternative sensory input or replacement behaviors.

Sample Hypothesis Statements

Example 1:

When asked to complete writing tasks, the student puts head down and refuses to work in order to escape difficult academic demands.

Example 2:

When peers tease the student, the student shouts and hits to gain attention and establish control of the social situation.

Example 3:

During transitions, the student runs and makes loud noises to seek sensory stimulation and movement input.

Each hypothesis should directly inform both the **replacement skill** (what to teach) and **environmental supports** (what to adjust).

Data Collection Tools

ABC (Antecedent–Behavior–Consequence) Chart

Date	Time	Setting	Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence	Function
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10/28	10:15	Math	Asked to write	Yelled “no”	Sent to hall	Escape
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Scatterplot Analysis

Track frequency of behaviors by time or setting to identify hot spots.

Time Block	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri
8–9am		X		X	
10–11am	X		X		X

Summary Graph Example:

Plot daily frequency or duration data to visualize trends before implementing a BIP.

Conducting Interviews for FBA Context

Who to Ask:

- Student (if appropriate)
- Classroom teachers
- Specialists (OT, SLP, counselor)
- Family/caregivers

Questions to Include:

- “What usually happens right before the behavior?”
- “What helps calm or prevent the behavior?”
- “What does the student enjoy or avoid?”
- “How does the student communicate frustration?”

FBA Quality Checklist

- Behavior is **observable and measurable**.
 - Data collected across **at least two settings or staff**.
 - Function is **identified using multiple data sources**.
 - Hypothesis statement is **specific and actionable**.
 - **Replacement skill** is clearly linked to function.
 - Family and student input are **included**.
 - Plan leads directly to **function-based interventions**.
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Case Study Example

Student: 6th grader with ADHD and anxiety.

Behavior: Leaves class without permission.

FBA Data: Occurs during independent reading and transitions.

Hypothesis: Student leaves class to escape silent work periods and seek adult reassurance.

Next Step: Teach help-seeking behavior & establish transition support; adjust plan in BIP.

Action Starter

- Review one student's behavioral data this week.

- Identify the most likely *function* of the target behavior using the four-function table.
- Draft a one-sentence hypothesis statement that links antecedent, behavior, and consequence.
- Share it with your team and use it as the foundation for your next BIP meeting.