

**GUIDE TO FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIOR ASSESSMENTS
AND
INTERVENTION PLANNING**

**Developed by Terri L. Nelson
School Psychologist
Area Special Education Coop
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Introduction:

A functional behavior assessment is a process of determining the relationships between events in a person's environment and the occurrence of challenging behaviors, and to gain information that will improve the effectiveness and efficiency of behavioral interventions. The main outcomes of a functional assessment include:

- a. An operational description of the challenging behavior.
- b. An identification of the events and circumstances that are regularly associated with the occurrence and the nonoccurrence of the challenging behavior.
- c. A definition of the social function, purpose or communicative function of the challenging behavior

In other words, we need to know what is the kid doing, when and where is he doing it, and what's he getting out of it? To do this, we begin by interviewing those around the child and having them fill out various checklists. Next, we directly observe the behavior. Once this information is gathered, we have the basis to form some hypotheses about how to improve the behavior. We can then formulate our interventions. It is important to understand that functional assessment is not a one time event, but an ongoing process. When we intervene with behavior, we need to continue to collect data to determine whether or not the intervention is working. If it isn't, we try again. Research has demonstrated that interventions based on a thorough functional assessment have a much higher probability of success.

Functional behavior assessments have been a required part of E/BD assessments for some time now, but have continued to be a source of frustration for many of us. The following presents a format for completing FBAs which is intended to simplify the process, make the information collected more useful, and generally improve our reaction to the words "Functional Behavior Assessment".

INSTRUCTIONS FOR USING FBA FORMS

Functional Assessment Interview (FAI):

Teacher Interview: The first step in a functional behavior assessment is the interview process. Begin with the school personnel who are most likely to provide a thorough and insightful description of the student's behavior. At the elementary level, this is most likely the classroom teacher, but could include special education teachers or para-professionals assigned to work directly with that student. It becomes a bit trickier at the high school level, but the best practice would probably be to meet with a group of the student's teachers and have them answer the questions together.

Parent Interview: After gathering the information from the student's teacher(s), interview the parent. However, begin by filling in Section A with the behaviors identified by the school personnel. When introducing the interview to the parent, indicate that these are the behaviors identified by the teacher, and ask if the parent has observed those behaviors or similar behaviors at home. Proceed with the interview focusing on those behaviors that are seen in both settings.

A. Description of Behaviors:

The purpose of this section is to get a clear description of the problem behaviors, along with the behaviors' frequency, duration and intensity. Make sure that the behavior is pretty well-defined (e.g. having both "stomping the floor and screaming" and "throwing things around the room" is better than one category called "tantrums") We also want to know which behaviors occur together, as one plan may work for a variety of behaviors, or a more severe behavior could be prevented by focusing on a less severe behavior that occurs earlier in the chain.

B. Setting Events

This section focuses on the aspects of a student's environment or daily routines that do not necessarily happen immediately before or after the problem behavior, but still affect the behavior. Identifying these factors can be very helpful in developing intervention plans.

C. Predictors

This section focuses on the environmental events that are likely to predict or "trigger" the behaviors. These may then become the focus of intervention.

D. Consequences

The purpose of this section is to try to determine what the child gains by demonstrating the behavior. Again, this information can be used in developing an intervention.

E. Efficiency of Behavior

The inclusion of this section is based on the idea that a child will utilize the behavior that takes the least effort to obtain his/her goal. In other words, if he currently escapes work by throwing a tantrum, we may be able to teach him to ask for a break instead, as that behavior takes much less effort (i.e. is more efficient)

F. Strengths

The purpose of this section is to identify the behaviors the child already displays that could be used instead of the inappropriate behaviors.

G. Do's and Don'ts

This section provides the teacher with an opportunity to share any insights he/she might have about how to work with this student.

H. Possible Rewards

This section is again aimed at developing an effective intervention, by providing information about what the student may be willing to work towards.

I. History of Behavior

This section lets us know what has been tried before, and what worked.

Motivation Assessment Scale (MAS)

Following the interviews with teachers and parents, give them a copy of the Motivation Assessment Scale for each of the behaviors identified in Section A. This tool helps to identify what motivates the student to engage in the behavior, looking specifically at the categories escape, attention, tangibles, and sensory stimulation. While this isn't a perfect tool, it may help to develop hypotheses regarding the causes of behavior, and so aid in intervention planning. This questionnaire can simply be given to the respondents to fill out at their leisure, rather than being completed in an interview format.

Functional Assessment Interview for Students:

After interviewing the student's teachers and parents, the next step is to interview the student. The purpose of this interview is to discover how the student perceives the situation, and to identify and predictors or consequences that the adults may not realize are at work. This interview also provides an opportunity to determine the extent to which the student is aware of the problem behaviors, and the amount of insight he/she has into the problem.

A. Opening

You can use your own words here, but the idea is to convey that this is a positive step, and not a lecture about behavior. We want the student to work with us, not fight us.

B. General Impressions of School

This is a general information-gathering group of questions, which should tell us a bit about the student's attitude toward school, as well as providing information about the predictors and consequences of behavior as perceived by the student.

C. Description of Behaviors

This is the student's version of Section A on the Parent and Teacher Interview. If they can't identify any problem behaviors, you may want to say something like "your teacher (mom, dad, etc.) mentioned that sometimes you . . ." and see if that gets a response. Again, you're getting the student's perception of the problem, which may be very different from the adult's perception. Here we gain insight into what's maintaining the behaviors, as well as an idea of how aware the student is of the problems she/he is having.

D. Schedule

Completing this section gives us a picture of the student's day, and what is positive and negative about it. We may also gain information about the personalities involved.

E. Setting Events

This section provides information about the environmental events that may be setting up the problem behaviors.

F. Consequences

This section allows us to find out what the student perceives as the consequences of his/her behavior. This may be very beneficial both in planning interventions, as well as in talking to the student about the behavior changes needed.

Functional Assessment Observation Form (FAO)

The purpose of direct observation is to gather data that will lead to hypotheses about what predicts and maintains problem behaviors. This, in turn, leads to the development of interventions to change the behavior patterns. While collecting such data is crucial to the formation of effective interventions, it can also become overwhelming in terms of effort and time. To help simplify this process, we will use the results of the interviews to guide the direct observation process.

When, where, who, and how long to observe:

Use the FAO to collect data throughout the student's day, and in as many environments as possible. We want a comprehensive picture of not only when/where behaviors do occur, but also when/where they don't. This data can be collected by anyone familiar with the data collection process, including teachers, paras, school psychologists, and school social workers. Ideally, data should be collected until a clear pattern of the relationships between behaviors and environmental situations has emerged. Typically, this requires observing a minimum of 15 to 20 occurrences of the targeted behaviors. It is recommended that this data be collected for a minimum of 2 to 5 days, but the frequency of the behavior will affect the length of time needed to observe the required number of occurrences.

Conducting observations using the FAO form:

Preparing the form: Before observing, tailor the FAO form to the student. Under the "Time" column, fill in the student's schedule, either with times (i.e. 8:00-8:30, 8:30-9:00, etc.) or activities/classes (i.e. reading, math, circle time, etc.) Next, fill in the "Behavior" section with the behaviors identified through the interview process (Section A on the FAI). Also add any predictors or consequences identified through the interview process that are not already listed in those sections. The form is now ready to be used. If using multiple observers, decide upon a convenient place to leave the observation form so that it is always accessible.

Steps for recording data:

1. When a problem behavior occurs, put the first unused number (from "Events" at the bottom of the form) in appropriate Behavior box(es) for the time being observed.
2. Use the same number to mark appropriate boxes in the "Predictors", "Immediate Consequences", and "Perceived Function" sections.
3. Cross out the just-used number in the "Events" list.
4. Write and comments about the behavior on the back of the form.
5. At the end of the observation, put your initials in the "Initial" box for the time observed.
6. Put a slash mark after the last number used in the "Events" section, and place the date under the numbers used.

If no events are observed, put your initials in the appropriate box, and write any desired comments on the back of the form.

Diagram Summary Statement and Competing Behavior Paths

Once the data is collected using the FAO, it is time to use that information to develop intervention plans. Begin by deciding which behaviors require intervention at this time. You should choose the 2 or 3 behaviors which are causing the student the most difficulty at this time. Write each behavior chosen on the “Problem Behavior” line, using a separate sheet for each behavior. Write in any setting events identified through the interviews (ex: Not enough sleep). Next, use the observational data to identify the most common predictor, and write that on the appropriate line. Then use the observational data to write in the most common immediate consequence on the lower “Maintaining Consequence” line. As a team, identify what you would like the student to ideally do instead (ex: If the student is currently screaming when presented with work to do, and the maintaining consequence is that the work is taken away, the desired behavior would be for the student to complete the work.) Then fill in what happens when the student performs that ideal behavior (ex: When the student completes the work appropriately, he receives verbal praise and more work to do.) Finally, as a team, determine what would be a reasonable replacement behavior for the undesired behavior which would result in the consequence he desires. (ex: The student could ask for a break from doing work.)

Below the summary statement diagram is a worksheet to plan interventions. In each of the four columns, try to list 2 to 3 possible strategies to change the environment or to teach the student skills in order to eliminate/decrease the problem behavior in favor of the replacement behavior. In the example used above, for the Setting Events Strategies column, you may list things such as talking to parents about sleep patterns, allowing the student to nap at school, discuss medication issues, etc. For the Predictor Strategies column, you might list strategies such as breaking work up into smaller portions, providing a visual schedule of work times, routinely providing “break” times in between work times, or providing the student with verbal reminders that work is coming. In the Teaching Strategies column, you may need to teach the child how to appropriately ask for a break, or how to recognize when he/she is becoming upset so that screaming isn’t necessary. Finally, under the Consequence column, you might list things such as not taking away the work when screaming occurs, providing rewards for not screaming, and initially always honoring a request for a break while always working towards longer work times. You now have a variety of strategies to choose from to decrease the screaming behavior. As a team, use this worksheet to develop a behavior plan, indicating specifics in terms of who does what, and how each strategy will be implemented. Monitor progress, and if necessary, go back to this worksheet to develop a new plan.