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Functional Behavioral Assessments: A guide for classroom teachers

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Definition: What is an FBA?

Functional behavioral assessment (FBA) is a tool used to determine the function that a problem behavior serves for an individual student (Austin & Sciarra, 2010). When conducting an FBA, professionals perform a variety of techniques including interviews, direct observational analyses, experimental functional analyses and other procedures in order to determine the antecedents, and consequences associated with a problem behavior (Gresham, Watson & Skinner, 2001). This information is then used to help the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, and individual teachers, develop interventions to extinguish the problem behavior and replace it with appropriate alternate behaviors.

The benefit of FBAs are that these assessments take a broad look at the problem behavior in the context of the setting in which it occurs. In this way, professionals can identify the social, cognitive and environmental factors that reinforce and/or elicit the behavior. Through an understanding of the antecedents, as well as determining the purpose a behavior serves for a student, interventions can be developed and assessed for their effectiveness. The center for Effective Collaboration and Practice provides a nice introductory summary to FBAs on their website: <http://cecp.air.org/fba/> (Gable, Quinn, Rutherford, Howell & Hoffmann, n.d.). This website also provides detailed instructions, worksheets, forms and instructional videos for conducting FBAs in addition to creating positive behavioral intervention plans and supports for children exhibiting problem behaviors.

Are FBAs mandated by the government?

Yes, in some cases, FBAs are mandated by the federal government under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA 2004, Section 614 (d)(3)(B)(i) states that “in the case of a child whose behavior impedes the child’s learning or that of others, [the IEP Team shall] consider the use of positive behavioral interventions and supports, and other strategies, to address that behavior.” Furthermore, in the cases of students who have been suspended for more than ten days in a school year, IDEA, 2004 Section 615 (k)(1)(F) states that if “...the relevant members of the IEP team make the determination that the conduct was a manifestation of the child’s disability, the IEP team shall conduct a functional behavior assessment, and implement a behavioral plan...” additionally “in the situation where a behavioral intervention has been developed, review the behavioral intervention plan...and modify it, as necessary to address the behavior...” Hendrickson, Gable, Contry, Fox & Smith (1999) note that IDEA now requires schools to address the relationship between student problem behaviors and the learning environment through the process of FBA and the development of behavioral intervention plans.

aloud to him, or be placed in groups with peers who will read him the materials aloud.

- Tom’s classmates will be taught about Tourette’s syndrome, and Tom will be allowed to discuss his disease with his peers if he feels comfortable.

Evaluation of the plan:

Tom and his resource room teacher will evaluate his progress using his self-report check list. The resource room teacher will discuss the implementation of Tom’s BIP with fellow teachers every Friday to make sure the interventions are being used appropriately and uniformly. If his behavior hasn’t improved by 50% in three weeks the IEP team will discuss alterations to the plan. Tom should have no incidents or outbursts in school within eight weeks. If in six weeks Tom’s behavior has not improved 90% relative to week one, the team will meet to discuss additional modifications and interventions.

Emergency Intervention Plan:

The resource room teacher will be called in for help if Tom has a behavioral outburst. The resource room teacher will conduct an out-briefing with the adult in charge at the time of the outburst to determine whether or not Tom’s BIP was being followed.

Instructional strategies used to teach the replacement behavior:

- The resource room teacher will model appropriate anger management strategies by thinking aloud in role-play situations. She will identify why she believes she is frustrated, and discuss possible ways to manage her anger. She will choose and model an appropriate way to reduce her anger.
- Tom will role-play situations in which he typically becomes angry. He will model self-talk and discuss ways to appropriately reduce his anger in these situations. He will practice this technique in real life situations and report back to his teacher on his progress. If the technique was successful, he will continue to use it in similar situations both inside and outside of school. If unsuccessful, he will brainstorm with his teachers and peers to identify reasons the technique did not work and possible modifications for next time.

Strategies to reduce problem behaviors and increase replacement behaviors:

- Adults will be taught the warning signs that indicate Tom's frustration. When these warning signs occur, adults will approach Tom to ask if he needs help.
- When Tom asks for assistance with the way he feels, adults will immediately comply or move him to a place where he can speak with another adult.

Changes to physical setting to promote replacement behaviors and reduce problem behaviors.

- Tom will be allowed to respond to questions verbally rather than in writing. He will never be asked to read aloud in class unless he asks to do so. When printed materials are given, Tom will be given an audio tape with materials read

What should an FBA include?

According to O'Neill et al., an FBA should contain five key outcomes,

1. A clear description of the problem behavior;
2. Identification of the events, times and situations that predict when the problem behavior will and will not occur;
3. Identification of the consequences that maintain the problem behavior;
4. Development of summary statements or hypotheses describing the problem behavior, the specific situations in which it occurs, and the outcomes that maintain the behavior in those situations; and
5. Collection of direct observation data that support the summary statements (as cited in Fox & Gable, 2004, p.143).

These five elements are necessary to determine not only the function of the behavior but also to develop behavioral interventions. The first three elements are designed to collect data on the problem behavior. This data is then use to develop a hypothesis regarding the function of the problem behavior and the factors that reinforce this particular behavior for the student. Lastly, O'Neill et al. note that further data must be collected to validate the hypothesis. Once this hypothesis has been validated, it can be used to generate possible behavioral interventions.

Who needs an FBA?

The Pennsylvania Department of Education states that “Individualized functional behavioral assessment (FBA) is used in instances where behavior interferes significantly with the student’s learning or that of his/her peers despite the consistent implementation of behavioral interventions developed from less formal behavioral assessments” (“Functional Behavioral Assessment”, 2009). Therefore, an FBA is appropriate for any student exhibiting problem behaviors that cannot be managed through typically effective classroom and school management approaches. FBAs are required by law for students that have been suspended for a total of ten or more days during the course of a school year (IDEA 2004, section 615 (k)(1)(F)).

Current problem behavior: Tom often becomes noticeably frustrated in academically and socially challenging situations. When this occurs he hangs his head and focuses intently on one thing before the onset of his emotional outbursts and aggressive behavior. During the outburst he becomes nonverbal except for his coprolalia.

Replacement behavior: When becoming frustrated, Tom will approach the adult in charge and ask for assistance. This replacement behavior will allow him to escape the situation without becoming disruptive or exhibiting inappropriate behaviors.

Measurement procedure for problem and replacement behaviors: Tom and his teachers will use a check list to count the number of times he has outbursts vs. the number of times he asks for help.

The results of Tom’s FBA were then used to create the following BIP.

Behavioral Intervention Plan:

Goals and objectives for teaching replacement behaviors:

- Tom will verbally identify and describe the signs he physically experiences when becoming frustrated.
- Tom will recognize that he is becoming frustrated and will ask for assistance from an adult rather than acting out.
- Tom will speak with the director of the YMCA, discuss the techniques he has been using, as well as his progress in controlling his disruptive behavior. He will ask if he can work with the adults at the YMCA to use his skills and return to the program.

(3) Identify the consequences that maintain the behavior:

As a consequence of his behavior, Tom is generally removed from the situation. Thus his behaviors result in an escape from frustrating situations.

(4) Hypothesis:

Tom's behavior serves to allow him to avoid situations that are academically and socially frustrating. Tom expects his peers to ridicule him about his tics and is embarrassed by his educational failures. He seeks to avoid this ridicule and embarrassment by avoiding social and academic situations in which he is likely to be teased.

(5) Data and observations that support the hypothesis:

Data collection: Ecological and curricular analyses were performed along with student and teacher questionnaires. The director of the YMCA was also contacted.

Data Summary:

- The YMCA director reported that Tom exploded when teased by his peers.
- Tom's 5th grade teacher reported that the students studied Tourette's syndrome at the beginning of the year and were more likely to ignore Tom's tics once they understood what was happening.
- Tom performs better when in a structured environment where adults work to deter peer teasing.
- In reading and language arts, when Tom is given oral directions or asked to respond orally he performs on grade level. However, Tom's learning disability causes difficulty with written language and Tom is more likely to display problem behaviors when asked to read or complete worksheets without assistance.

How often is one completed?

An FBA is completed when a behavior is disruptive to the learning environment and cannot be managed by either typical behavioral management strategies or educational best practices. An FBA must also be completed when a problem behavior is identified by a child's IEP team as being a manifestation of a student's illness. The FBA process is a dynamic one. There is no standard interval for functional behavioral analyses. Once an FBA is completed, behavioral interventions are continuously evaluated for their effectiveness. If an intervention ceases to be effective, a new FBA can be performed to reassess the problem behavior, as well as possible causes and potential intervention strategies.

Can I complete an FBA?

In general, FBAs are completed by a child's IEP team or by a behavioral specialist. The outcomes of the FBA should be listed in the child's IEP along with potential behavioral interventions. These outcomes and interventions are then implemented in the classroom to monitor and control behavior. Ideally, the FBA will identify appropriate consequences, reinforcements and procedures to be used in the general education classroom.

While classroom teachers do not typically conduct and analyze FBA data on their own, they are an integral part of the process. Classroom teachers are the professionals that have the greatest amount of contact with students on a daily basis. Therefore, problem behaviors will often first be reported in the classroom. From here the IEP team can be brought in to perform an FBA. During the course of data collection the student may be evaluated in a classroom setting or by the direct observation of a behavioral specialist. The classroom teacher may also be asked to fill out a worksheet identifying the factors that elicit the problem behavior. An ABC (Antecedent, Behavior, Consequence) worksheet is an example of this type of data collection. Teachers, parents and others who have direct interaction with the child are asked to explicitly identify the antecedents and consequences as well as the problem behavior itself. Experts in the field, Vance Austin and Daniel Sciarra have created a sample template

Case Study

Adapted from Gable, Quinn., Rutherford, Howell, & Hoffmann (n.d.).

Tom, a 13 year old student, has been exhibiting serious behavioral problems and disrupting the learning environment in Ms. Giblow's classroom. Yesterday he threw a dictionary, knocked over and kicked his desk in addition to yelling obscenities at the teacher and his fellow students. The resource room teacher was called in to help calm the student and remove him from the classroom. As a result, Ms. Giblow has requested that an IEP meeting be convened to begin the FBA process and create a BIP to manage Tom's behaviors.

Functional Behavior Assessment:

(1) Give a clear description of the problem behavior:

Tom has Tourette's Syndrome which manifests itself in disruptive ticks, and cursing. When frustrated, Tom often throws objects, overturns furniture and curses at educators and peers.

(2) Identify the events, times and situations that exacerbate or diminish the occurrence of the problem behavior.

Tom's problematic behaviors seem to occur most often when he is academically frustrated or when he feels ridiculed by his peers. Because of his behavior, Tom was asked not to return to the local YMCA.

The problematic behaviors do not occur as frequently in the resource room for students with emotional disturbance and rarely occur at home. Furthermore, these negative behaviors are new and were not present in his classroom previous years.

portant thing to remember is that each problem behavior serves a function for the student exhibiting that behavior. Therefore, the behavioral management strategy utilized must be tailored towards replacing the problem behavior with a more adaptive behavior. This process allows the child's needs to be met without disrupting the learning environment.

for this type of assessment as a model (2010).

The IEP team then uses this information to develop a hypothesis on the function the behavior serves for the student. From here possible interventions are developed. If the problem behavior is being exhibited in the classroom setting, the classroom teacher should then use the appropriate intervention and collect data on its effectiveness. The intervention can then be evaluated and adjusted as necessary.

Shumate and Wills performed a study entitled "Classroom-based functional analysis and intervention for disruptive and off-task behaviors" (2010). In this study a classroom teacher, along with the researchers, performed an FBA and tested three possible interventions to extinguish off-task behaviors. While the teacher was ultimately happy with the established interventions, he stated that he did not believe that he had the time or resources to individually perform this type of assessment in the future. FBAs, when done thoroughly, take a great deal of time and attention. As Hendrickson, Gable, Conroy, Fox and Smith (1999) point out, it takes a dedicated team of individuals to effectively perform an FBA.

How does the FBA contribute to the process of developing effective behavior management strategies?

FBA's are integral to developing effective behavior management strategies. Students with severe problem behaviors account for only 1-5% of the student population but can often account for more than 50% of reported behavioral incidents (Sugai 2000). Thus it is imperative that schools find a way to manage such behaviors. Standard behavior management practices can often unintentionally reinforce these types of problem behaviors by offering attention or a means of escape for the student exhibiting the behavior. In these situations, FBAs are extremely useful as a means of determining what function the behavior serves for the student. Once the behavior is understood in terms of its utility, an appropriate set of consequences and behavior management strategies can be developed.

Ideally, when a student is exhibiting problematic behaviors that cannot be controlled by standard classroom rules and procedures an IEP team will conduct an FBA. From the observations and data collected during the FBA process, a hypothesis is generated regarding the function of the behavior and the factors that reinforce it. This hypothesis can then be used to create a behavioral intervention plan (BIP) to address the behavior. An example of this process is provided in the case study section of this booklet.

The FBA and the proposed BIP should be explained in detail within the child's IEP. This document should include specific behavioral management strategies for managing the behavior as well as any suggestions for eliminating antecedents to the behavior. The proposed strategies should be used uniformly by all personnel that have contact with the student. Additionally, data should be collected on the effectiveness of the intervention and frequency of the problem behavior. This data is then use to determine wither the current strategies are sufficient for controlling the behavior or if the BIP should be reassessed and adjusted.

When used appropriately, FBAs and BIPs are powerful tools for managing problem behaviors. The key, however, is that the FBA must provide specific information relating to the function the concerned behavior is serving to the individual student. The BIP must then be individually tailored to that students needs and behaviors. This is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Furthermore, the strategies in the BIP must be universally applied by all school personnel. Unfortunately, many of today's schools lack both time and resources. Sugai et al. (2000 p. 132) point out that in the face of these challenges "...many schools lack the capacity to identify, adopt and sustain policies, practices, and systems that effectively and efficiently meet the needs of all students." In reality, if the framework for performing a full scale FBA and developing an individually tailored BIP is not in place, teachers will have to incorporate these concepts and goals into their own classroom based behavior management styles. The most im-