

Functional Behavior Assessments: A Guide for Parents

By Kurtis Paul
University of Pittsburgh
Copyright 2011, K. Paul

Table of Contents

What is a Functional Behavior Assessment?.....	2
Glossary.....	3
Six Steps for Writing a Functional Behavior Assessment.....	4
Case Study – Apply the Six Steps.....	5
Discussion Questions.....	7
Frequently Asked Questions	7
Annotated Bibliography	8

What is a Functional Behavior Assessment?

“Functional behavior assessment (FBA) is defined as a systematic process of identifying problem behaviors and the events that (a) reliably predict occurrence and nonoccurrence of those behaviors and (b) maintain the behaviors across time” (OSEP, 2000). A behavior subjected to FBAs will be looked at from multiple individuals at multiple levels to properly identify what is causing the behavior and what is maintaining the behavior so that a replacement behavior may be applied.

Why use Functional Behavior Assessment?

Officially, they are mandated by law as of June of 1997. Under amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) both positive behavior support and FBAs must be used when a child’s conduct violates school codes of conduct or are outside norms of acceptable behavior.

Also., research has proven their effectiveness to change behavior. The approach doesn’t punish a behavior. It identifies the antecedents that prompt the negative behaviors and the consequences that reinforce the behavior to occur. By defining these variables we may intervene both environmentally and socially to remove negative behaviors and teach more appropriate behaviors.

Who needs Functional Behavior Assessment?

A FBA can be written for any child. The federal government, however, mandates that any child identified with an emotional or behavior disorder have a FBA to guide the planning of behavior interventions. FBAs help adults better understand children who have a high number of office referrals, behavior or emotional disorders, or who appear to struggle socially.

Six Steps for Writing a Functional Behavior Assessment

(OSEP, 2000)

1. Data collection, collect all forms of data surrounding the youth and negative behavior.

Identify the antecedents and consequences that reinforce the behavior.

2. Develop operational hypothesis using information from data collection.

Develop an if then statement around the behavior using the antecedents and consequences.

If (an antecedent) occurs the student will (problem behavior) then (a maintaining consequence) will occur.

3. Directly observe child to confirm accuracy of hypothesis.

4. Design behavior support plans around operational hypothesis.

Modify antecedents and remove maintaining consequences to make problem behavior ineffective.

5. Develop implementation scripts which outline who is responsible for each part of the behavior support plan.

6. Collect data on program effectiveness. Redesign whatever areas are not functioning.

Case Study – Apply the Six Steps

Jimmy Age 9

- Jimmy
 - From office referrals to success
- Step 1: Information gathering
 - We learn the antecedents and maintaining behaviors
 - Jimmy’s referrals occur during math class. His behavior is to walk around the room refusing to do his math work. And finally that he is asked to go to the principal’s office
- Step 2: Hypothesis
 - State the problem behavior with antecedents and consequences that maintain behavior
 - If given math work, Jimmy will leave seat where teacher will react by sending him to the office
- Step 3: Direct Observation
 - Confirming hypothesis
 - After multiple observations by multiple observers it is confirmed that Jimmy only displays the problem behavior when prompted with math assignment
- Step 4: Design behavior support plan
 - Jimmy needs to be taught appropriate classroom behaviors by the instructor.
 - No longer send Jimmy to office
 - Verbally praise Jimmy for staying in seat during math
 - Make sure Jimmy knows how to do the assignment

On an individual level, make sure Jimmy can do basic steps of math before proceeding

- Step 5: Implementation
 - Assignments of who's doing what
 - Math teacher teaching Jimmy appropriate behaviors, verbally rewarding when appropriate, and giving him direct attention to ensure he is on task
 - Guidance Counselor will follow up with successive steps of the plan
 - Parents will encourage Jimmy to succeed in math and reward him for days he remains on task
- Step 6 : Evaluation
 - Does Jimmy's behavior improve?

Jimmy's math grade has improved, he is not given an office referral again during the grading period, and the teacher has confirmed improvements to the guidance counselor.

Discussion Questions

1. **What are the benefits of using Functional Behavior Assessment as opposed to using one perspective in the moment?** (Example teacher reacting to a situation)
 - What if a child acts out to avoid assignments?
 - What if the child simply doesn't understand what is being asked of them?
 - o How would you determine the child doesn't understand?
2. **What is the function of behavior?**
[Hint – it reinforces or negates the behavior]

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. If my child receives a FBA, does that mean there is something wrong with my child?

A. Not necessarily. It means a problem behavior has been identified and the school will attempt to replace the behavior with an acceptable behavior without removing the student from the classroom.

Q. Will my child miss out on class time to participate in a FBA?

A. Perhaps, but very minimally. The child may be asked to participate in an interview to help guide the process but other than that it should be business as usual.

Q. What if the FBA doesn't work?

A. It is important to have patience with the process. It will work we just need to verify each step. It may seem like a long process for very little change, but it's important to take time with each step so we don't incorrectly identify problems and possibly make other behaviors worse.

Annotated Bibliography

Heiman, T. (2002). Parents of children with disabilities: Resilience, coping, and future expectations. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities, 14*(2), 159-171.
doi:10.1023/A:1015219514621

Dr. Tali Heiman is a professor with the Open University of Israel and received her doctorate in Special Education from Tel Aviv University in 1996. She has published in journal and books since 1983. She begins the article by educating the reader on recent research around defining resilience - what factors made it more likely for a person to emerge successfully from a hardship. Another discussion emerges on the similarities between families with a child with a disability and families without children with disabilities until developing the thesis, "how does the resilience of parents emerge in a family with a child with a disability (pp. 161)?" Researchers conducted a survey of parents via telephone to determine factors of past present and future to determine a family's likelihood of displaying resilience. Based on parents responses they sought to find what kept morale positive throughout the experience. Often parents reacted negatively towards the diagnoses, but found positive aspects and eventually became concerned for the child's future and place in the world. Factors of resilience stated in this article include: "open consultation with family, friends, and professionals; a positive bond between the parents' that supports, and strengthens them; and a continuous and intensive educational, therapeutic, and psychological support for the family members (pp. 169)." With regards to understanding functional behavior assessments the study articulates the need of parental involvement in the process particularly with history and reaction to diagnosis as well as steps

taken to receive treatment both for the child with a disability and the family as needed.

Jull, S., & Mirenda, P. (2011). Parents as play date facilitators for preschoolers with autism. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 13(1), 17-30.

doi:10.1177/109830070935811

The first author, Stephanie Jull, is a doctoral student at the University of British Columbia. Her research is funded by the Autism Research Training program and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The second author, Dr. Pat Mirenda of the University of British Columbia, is a professor of Education and Special Education with a focus in research on positive behavior support. The article begins by stating previous success of social interaction interventions between students with autism and their typically developing classmates. The study attempts to answer the ability of parents to conduct a play date between their child and their peers using best practices. Also, the study asks whether the success of the play dates reflect in daily interactions between the student with autism and normally developing peers. The study found that over time parents could implement strategies used by health care professionals to conduct play dates between children with autism and normally developing peers. In regards to functional behavior assessment, the article emphasizes strategies that have been proven to serve the functions of children with autism. The article doesn't use language regarding functional behavior assessments, but emphasizes the success of strategies because they serve the functions of the children with autism. It articulates an area of need that functional behavior assessments would serve otherwise not specifically mentioned.

Park, J. H., Alber-Morgan, S. R., & Fleming, C. (2011). Collaborating with parents to implement behavioral interventions for children with challenging behaviors. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 43*(3), 22-30.

Dr. Ju Hee Park is an Assistant Professor at Wheelock College within the Special Education Department, Dr. Sheila R. Alber-Morgan is an Associate Professor at Ohio State University, and Courtney Fleming a doctoral student in the Special Education Program at Ohio University. The article begins by advocating the parents - with how critical they are to a successful intervention and the stress they are under when their home life isn't running smoothly. From here the article educates parents about the behavioral approach in an attempt to get parents to think in terms of antecedent, behavior, and consequence (ABC). The article goes on to instruct parents on how to observe simple behaviors and engage in an intervention themselves where they can track the occurrences of a behavior and see it decrease as their intervention is implemented. In general, the article advocates the use of parents as experts of their children and how imperative it is to use the primary care giver as the primary interventionist on challenging behaviors within the home. With regards to the study, it shows what a good resource the parents are and to think in terms of ABC. For example in the article they reference a child crying to get their way. If the crying works that serves as a function to obtain what they want and they've been positively rewarded for that function. After a parent understand these terms and sees the process, they can intervene and change the behavior by changing the function.

Sugai, G., Liaupsin, C., Wickham, D., Lewis, T. J., Hieneman, M., Scott, T., . . . OSEP Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions. (2000). Applying positive behavior

support and functional behavioral assessment in schools. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 2(3), 131-143. doi:10.1177/109830070000200302

This article is written by OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions (PBIS), which collaborates “between the U.S. Department of Education and 11 technical assistance units across the United States.” A variety of authors were utilized to maintain best practices and reliability. The article begins by presenting the implication of positive behavior support and functional behavioral assessment in regards to policy through the Individuals with Disabilities Act. The authors then steps back and outline the current challenges of schools with regards to behavioral policies and their inability to define cause and solution of behavior problems. They then define positive behavior support as a general term for using positive support to emphasize socially acceptable behaviors. The authors then introduce it in terms of Behavior Sciences, Practical Interventions, and Social Values to emphasize how practical it would be to utilize in the school setting. Next the authors discuss the Public Health Model in regards to behavior support planning. They go on to define functional behavior assessment and how to utilize it through 6 steps: Collect Data, Develop Hypothesis, Direct Observation, Behavior Support Plan, Implement Scripts, and Evaluate/Redesign. The article concludes by discussing schools as the area of implementation of such practices. This article outlined a very detailed approach to Functional Behavior Assessment. They define it, describe how one is ordered, and then give detail on the appropriate steps in the process.

Scott, T.M., Nelson, C. M., & Zabala, J. (2003). Functional behavior assessment training in public schools: Facilitating systemic change. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 5(4), 216-224. doi:10.1177/10983007030050040501

Dr. Scott is an Assistant Professor at the University of Florida within the Special Education Department. Dr. Nelson is a professor at the University of Kentucky in the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation Counseling. Dr. Zabala received her doctorate in Special Education and is now the Director of Technical Assistance at the Center for Applied Special Technology. This article begins by outlining and defining various principles of the Individuals with Disabilities Act. The authors emphasize, define, and give evidence of success for functional behavior assessments. The article builds an argument for Functional Behavior Assessments in schools in conjunction with school wide positive support systems by defining it as a collaborative process. The article then uses the Public Health model to show successful numbers and an equation stating change will occur if there is a shared vision and knowledge the change will be greater than the cost. From the shared the article moves to the fidelity with which it is implemented. The authors then point out the collaborative process isn't to determine faulty teachers, but make a general awareness about situations and how the school as a system should respond. The article closes by stating again the effectiveness of Functional Behavior Assessment, yet notes it's still debatable efficiency as of 2003 and emphasized schools seeking training for faculty. This article, though relatively recent, articulates the historical success of Functional Behavior Assessments. The article presents a case of field tested best practices being implemented into school districts creating a multitude of success if implemented properly, which really promotes the need of training, adoption of the cause, and building a future for functional behavior assessments.