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# Operational Definitions of Behavior

What is an operational definition of behavior and why is it important? An operational definition of a behavior is a clear and precise description of a behavior free of opinions and assumptions. The definition needs to be so specific anyone will easily be able to identify whether the behavior is occurring or not. The definition is observable and measurable.

Let's look at an example. Our student has been described as refusing work presented to him. What does refusal of work mean? Does he say, "No?" Does he throw the work on the floor? Does he hit the person giving him the work? Does he put his head on the desk? We don't know what refusal means. We cannot accurately observe or measure this behavior because it is unclear.

Why does it matter? One of the most important tasks we employ as special educators is determination of a function or reason for behavior. To do that, we accurately describe a behavior of concern and take data on its occurrence. This is the only way to make a data-based decision. It takes the guesswork out of our eventual plan.

Let's consider our student who is refusing work. We have no idea why he is refusing work, so we want to watch the behavior and look for clues. If several people are watching and taking data, they need to be watching the same thing so the data will mean something. If the teacher is watching for him to verbalize, "No," and the paraeducator is indicating refusal only when he puts his head on the desk, and another para only counts hitting; does our data tell us anything? We need to know exactly what we are looking for and recognize when it begins and ends. Otherwise, our data is meaningless.

What if we did this? The team met and determined that an operational definition of refusal for this student is: *Student puts his head on the desk for more than one minute without picking up work materials.* Sometimes it is helpful to provide a non-example of the behavior. For example, *Student puts head on the desk when there is not a work task assigned.* We would not take data on occurrences of the non-example.

Now the teacher and paraeducators can all count the same thing. As they compare their data, they are noticing the “refusal” occurs at about the same two times every day. During language arts, the students typically have a writing assignment or must complete a worksheet. During social studies, the students are also required to write. They are not seeing “refusal” during math or science. Now, the staff has something with which to work. Eventually, they will determine the function of the “refusal” to work is to escape specific writing tasks. Their behavior support plan will focus on giving the student a more appropriate way to avoid the work by asking for a break. They will also investigate accommodations that make the writing tasks more palatable to their student.

If the teacher and paraprofessionals had not had a good operational definition of the behavior, they may have taken data on all sorts of behavior. This would not have resulted in the good, targeted behavior plan they developed. We think their plan was more than likely successful, but it all started with an observable and measurable operational definition. A recommended resource for further information is at this link: <https://masteraba.com/examples-of-operational-definitions/>

Let's look at some additional examples.

Definition	Operational Definition
Jose wanders around the room.	During direct instruction, Jose moves from his desk to the shelving where play materials are stored.
Mary engages in non-productive activities during free reading time.	Mary removes and holds items from the sensory box in her desk five to seven times during the half hour free reading session.
Jamie is mean to other kids on the playground.	Jamie pushes a classmate off the swings during the beginning of recess then sits on the swing for the remaining recess time.
Candice is a poor eater.	Candice stirs food on her lunch tray but does not put it in her mouth. She drinks an average of half of the milk in her carton.
Andy is non-compliant.	Andy runs from the teacher during outdoor recess when the bell rings for students to line up to go inside.

Jackson doesn't want to do his work.	Jackson scribbles on his math worksheet and then wads it up leaving it on his desk.
JoJo is aggressive.	JoJo walks up to classmates in the free play area and hits them on the arm, but not hard enough to leave a red mark.

- Armed with the observable and measurable operational definitions above, the school team can gather specific data useful in planning interventions. For example, they might notice a pattern of times Jose wanders around the room. That will help them know when to intervene and will give clues as to accommodations that might be appropriate.
- We don't have enough information yet but let's make a data-based guess that Mary needs more sensory input during her day. The team might eventually (with more data) make a plan to provide Mary with the sensory input she desires at a time immediately before free reading.
- Is Jamie mean, or could it be he doesn't have the skills to negotiate a turn on the swings. We can teach that!
- We don't have near the information we need for Candice, but at least our operational definition is giving us a start.
- Indicating a student is non-compliant does nothing to help us determine a reason or function for interfering behavior. An operational definition is much more helpful. With more information, we suspect the team will determine Andy is avoiding coming back in from recess. There are multiple strategies to support more appropriate behavior.
- Jackson doesn't always have a problem with schoolwork. His behavior occurs during math.
- The team took data for several days for JoJo's hitting behavior. Along with other information, they eventually determined JoJo did not have the skills to engage with other children during play. They made a plan to teach those skills.

It is important to remember that the operational definition doesn't tell us everything we need to know to make a workable and successful intervention plan. Operational Definitions are one part of a comprehensive Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA). Development of an observable and measurable definition of behavior is a critical first step to making data-based and accurate decisions. Results of the FBA indicate the function or reason for an interfering behavior, but the process starts with an accurate description. Assuming someone is mean, non-compliant or averse to school is

*damaging*. Describing the specific behavior, integrating it into the FBA and development of a support plan is *helpful*.

Here are some simple guiding questions to ask yourself when developing operational definitions.

- Can you count the number of times the behavior occurred or measure the length of time the behavior occurred? (Yes)
- Will a stranger know exactly what to look for from reading your operational definition? (Yes)
- Can you break down the target behavior into smaller behavioral components, each of which is more specific and observable than the target behavior? (You should answer No to this one.)

Cooper, J.O., Heron, T.E., & Heward, W.L. (2020) Applied behavior analysis (3rd edition) Hoboken, NJ: Pearson Education.

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