PROJECT ACCESS INFORMATION SHEET

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Functional Behavior Assessment

A Functional Behavior Assessment or FBA is listed as an effective intervention in the Missouri Guidelines Initiative (MAGI) publication, Autism Spectrum Disorders: Guide to Evidence-based Interventions.

This is an assessment procedure involving data collected over time to determine the function or purpose of a behavior. Effective behavioral support plans based on the findings of an FBA are an important piece of the overall programming for a learner with challenging behaviors.

An FBA is required when long or multiple suspensions are given, but best practice is proactive assessment, so learners do not get to the point suspensions are considered.

What happens during an FBA? Typically, the challenging behavior is identified and many questions are considered. What does the behavior look like? When does it occur? When does it not occur? What happens before and after the behavior? With whom does the behavior occur? The list could go on and on. File reviews are completed and interviews with parents, teachers, para-educators, and others who have pertinent information take place. Most important is structured observation of the learner and his behavior.

Typically, observation is divided into an ABC format. The A stands for antecedent, and the events preceding the behavior are documented. These events may be divided into two sections called setting events and stimulus events. Setting events might be something like the child has been sick, the bus was late, or medications have been changed. Stimulus events might include an unexpected change in the schedule, a demand to do a non-preferred task, or a loud noise. The point of identifying antecedents is we can do something about them! If a challenging behavior is the result of a loud noise, we can do what we can to eliminate loud noises, or we can encourage the child to wear a headset. If schedule changes are difficult, we can provide a visual schedule to help our learner deal with last minute changes. According to information from the Institute of Applied Behavior Analysis (IABA), 75% of what we provide in terms of behavior support should happen before the behavior. Prevention is always the best!

The B stands for behavior, and here we want a good clear description of the behavior, so multiple people can take data on the same thing. Our information won't mean much if the description of the behavior is inaccurate or too broad.

Finally, the C stands for consequences. What happens after the occurrence of a behavior? Consequences maintain behavior. If a child is acting silly in class, and his friends laugh, the child is more likely to continue acting silly. The consequence is reinforcing. If a behavior is consistently ignored (no reinforcement), it is likely to extinguish or go away. (This is hard to accomplish, by the way. We usually add other procedures, such as reinforcing an alternate behavior when working on extinction.) Sometimes, the consequence becomes the antecedent for challenging behavior, and this must be considered.

Once we identify the circumstances before and after a challenging behavior, we can do something about them! This is the key to a successful behavior support plan. If we can change what is happening in the environment before the occurrence of a challenging behavior and prevent the behavior, why wouldn't we? If we can add reinforcement or take away inadvertent reinforcement, or change a consequence in some other way to reduce the likelihood of a challenging behavior from occurring, why wouldn't we?

FBAs may become more complicated than what has been described above. Some behaviors may have multiple functions or purposes. Some antecedents may not be under our control. Multiple challenging behaviors may have to be prioritized and dealt with one by one. Consistent data must be collected to determine whether our support is working or needs to be changed. The function of a challenging behavior may change over time. So, this is a dynamic process and requires ongoing attention. Further, well-done FBAs may require much more than what has been offered here. This article represents the basics.

Nevertheless, the behavior plans that have the best chance of success are based on FBAs. Project ACCESS offers a one-day workshop on Functional Behavior Assessment. Check our website for schedules: http://projectaccess.missouristate.edu.