PROJECT ACCESS FACT SHEET #56

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Missouri's educational leader in autism support

Functional Communication Training

Jason has been pinching his classmates during free time and recess. His teacher is at her wit's end and parents are complaining. A consultant at the school has assisted the teacher in completion of a Functional Behavior Assessment or FBA, and together they have determined the reason Jason is pinching is to gain the attention of his classmates. (An FBA is a multi-step assessment to get to the reason or function of a problem behavior, and this process is reviewed in Fact Sheet 26: Functional Behavioral Assessment.) The consultant and teacher now have a good idea why Jason is pinching. They know the *function* of the pinching. That is going to make a difference in how they will address the problem.

Jason wants the attention of his friends. That's a good thing, and his teacher wants to help him. She and the consultant are going to use Functional Communication Training (FCT) to help. Jason has speech and language deficits and is not well understood by others. FCT is aimed at giving an individual a more appropriate and socially acceptable communication alternative to challenging behavior. Jason has an iPad with an app downloaded that can be programmed to speak for him. Maybe Jason can be taught to use the app to "ask" others to play with him. Definitely worth a try…

Jason is now using the iPad app to get his friends' attention. The other students think it is cool that his iPad can speak, and Jason has almost eliminated pinching. It took significant training, but the attention of his friends is reinforcing, and he has maintained his use of the iPad.

It wasn't *what* Jason wanted that was a problem. It was the *way* he was expressing his desire.

This scenario illustrates the premise of Functional Communication Training. It is the replacement of inappropriate behavior with a more appropriate behavior. That statement doesn't go far enough, though. The appropriate behavior has to *meet the same function* or *get the child the same thing* as the inappropriate behavior. That's the tricky part. Jason pinched to engage his peers. He is now using the iPad to engage his peers. Both behaviors get the same result.

Let's look at another scenario:

Julie hates math, and when the teacher gives her a math worksheet to complete, she swipes it off the table and puts her head down on the desk. A Functional Behavioral Assessment has been completed, and the conclusion is Julie is *avoiding* math worksheets. The teacher would like Julie to complete the worksheets, but it is more important to Julie's future success that she behave in a more appropriate way. Remember, Functional Communication Training is an intervention focused on replacing a problem behavior with a more appropriate behavior that gets the child the same thing. Even though it seems counterintuitive, the teacher and consultant are going to teach Julie an *appropriate way to avoid* completion of the math worksheet. Later, procedures can be put in place to help Julie complete math worksheets. For right now, the staff and Julie's family are happy she is learning better ways to communicate!

Functional Communication Training can involve multiple modes of communication. Some students may need voice generating communication devices. Others may use sign language or exchange pictures. Still others may be able to use their own voices. Whatever the mode, FCT is an important strategy when faced with challenging behavior. Remember though: it is not the message that is a problem; it is the way the message is conveyed! Another way of expressing this is with the term functional equivalence. Both the challenging behavior and the alternative, more appropriate behavior, meet the same function. They are functionally equivalent!