



Understanding FBA



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What is an FBA?

A Functional Behavior Assessment is a process designed to discover the function(s) or reason(s) for a person's behavior. There is always a reason for interfering behavior, and when that reason is identified, we can address it in a way that produces good results. Assuming the reason or function for a behavior usually leads down the wrong path and makes our behavior support plan less likely to succeed. Behavior support based on the results of an FBA help educators develop a Function-Based Behavior Support Plan.

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Times when a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) is conducted:

1. The parent requests a behavior assessment from the school
2. The IEP team determines that a behavior assessment is needed
3. The IEP team wants to change a child's placement due to behavior

Any time a child's behavior is interfering with their learning or the learning of others.

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Scenario 1:

When Roddy comes into his third-grade classroom, he stomps his feet and slams his backpack on his desk. He sits down hard and repeatedly hits his fist on the desk. The staff assumed he was unhappy about being at school and was communicating that with his behavior. An FBA was completed, and it was determined Roddy had sensory needs that were not being met. It turns out Roddy likes school, but his behavior was an attempt to obtain the sensory input he required. What would have been a Behavior Support Plan designed to help Roddy adjust to school wouldn't have been successful. Instead, the team consulted with an occupational therapist to develop a sensory program that helped Roddy get his needs met more appropriately. Further, and this is key, the staff helped Roddy learn to communicate when he felt he needed sensory input. This made it unnecessary for Roddy to have to slam items and hit the desk with his fists. It boiled down to this: Roddy was communicating he needed sensory input with his behavior. The team taught him a better way to communicate that and with the help of the occupational therapist had a plan in place to provide what he needed.

Scenario 2:

Maria is a high school student who is provided services in a self-contained classroom for students with moderate to severe challenges. Maria sometimes becomes aggressive by displaying a chain of increasingly agitated behaviors resulting finally in hitting. This kind of behavior might have resulted in Maria leaving school for an even more restrictive placement. Luckily for Maria, the team conducted an FBA and discovered that shortly after a behavioral incident, Maria ended up in her doctor's office with a diagnosis of an ear infection. It took quite a bit of detective work to learn that Maria's behavior signaled she was trying to communicate her ear hurt. Maria is functionally nonverbal, so the team taught her to point to her ear when it hurt. They helped her point at the beginning of the behavior change. Mom was called right away and a doctor's appointment was made. Because the team was dedicated to the provision of function-based support, an unfortunate change in placement was avoided.

Scenairo 3:

School appears to be hard for Jacob. He especially seems to dislike pencil/paper tasks. When these are presented, Jacob will work for a few minutes then push the materials off his desk onto the floor and lay his head on the desk. The staff feels he is frustrated and needs to try harder. Some of the staff have even described Jacob as lazy. After an FBA was completed, it was determined Jacob was communicating he wanted to escape from this non-preferred and difficult task. The Behavior Support Plan developed for Jacob involved giving him a break card he could hold up when he wanted to escape the task. He was given a short break and helped to go back to the task at hand. This appropriate escape behavior, while not the desired behavior yet, was much better than pushing materials away and laying his head on the desk. Because the team knew the function or reason for his behavior, they were confident in this plan. This was not all they did. Jacob was given ways to make the writing task more palatable in terms of appropriate accommodations. For example, he was given a choice of writing instruments, assignments were shortened, and frequent checks were offered. Even though Jacob was asking for breaks, this was much more appropriate than his previous behavior, and he was getting more work completed.



How Does the Special Education Team Complete an FBA?
Completion of an FBA requires the gathering of data. The team will review file materials and other information on hand. They will ask teachers, paraeducators and others to complete questionnaires and describe behaviors. Sometimes screening forms are completed to help determine possible functions of behavior. Families should be part of this process. You have the best information concerning your child.

Usually, from the data and information gathered above, the team will have a fairly good idea of the behavior or behaviors of concern. They will define behaviors operationally. That means the behaviors will be described in an observable and measurable way. No assumptions or opinions are included. Here is an example of an operational definition: Carrie pinches classmates on the arm hard enough to leave a red mark. Nobody offers a reason for this behavior. It is described so observers can then take data on the behavior. Everyone knows exactly what to look for.

The team is then ready to observe the student. They will look for what happens before the behavior and what happens after the behavior because they know these environmental conditions influence the behavior. Often what happens before the behavior will be a trigger or stimulus for the behavior. Remember Jacob? When the teacher presented pencil/paper tasks, he engaged in interfering behavior.

We call what happens after the behavior the consequence, but we don't mean that word in terms of punishment. We describe the consequence as simply what happens after the behavior. Sometimes the consequence causes the behavior to continue. For example, Jacob's behavior allowed him to escape the non-preferred task, so he was more likely to continue that behavior. This information was critical to his behavior support plan. By looking at this sequence of events called ABC charting, we can get a better idea about the function of behavior.



Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence (ABC CHart)

| Antecedent/Setting Event | Antecedent/Stimulus Event | Behavior | Consequence |
|--|---|---|--|
| Not evident | Student is alone walking around the classroom | Student approaches a classmate and pinches classmate hard enough to leave a red mark on the arm | Classmate starts crying. Teacher talks to the student about not pinching friends |
| Indoor recess <input type="checkbox"/> | Student is alone walking around the classroom | Student approaches a classmate and pinches classmate hard enough to leave a red mark on the arm | Classmate runs away. Para educator pulls the student aside and tells her we don't pinch |
| Free play time | Student is alone walking around the classroom | Student approaches a classmate and pinches classmate hard enough to leave a red mark on the arm | Classmate runs to the teacher. The student is sent to the office where the principal talks with her about not pinching |

There are other ways to gather this data, but the ABC chart is most common. We don't have near enough information from just this brief piece of charting, but added with the questionnaires, screening information, additional observations, information from family and others, the function of this student's pinching behavior became clear. You see that when the pinching happened the student was alone. After the behavior, she received attention (even though she was reprimanded) from the teacher, para, and principal. Hmm. Do you think she might be trying to obtain attention by pinching her classmates? Maybe.

The team described this student as minimally verbal. She didn't have a well-developed system to communicate with others. They often observed her at the edges of groups of students but not engaging with them. It was looking more and more like this student might be pinching to engage with classmates.

Now let's look a little more closely to the consequences. What does this student get after pinching a classmate? If you guessed attention, you are right. The student did not get attention from her classmates (they avoid her), but she got plenty of attention from the adults, and in her mind, that might have been even better! Do you see what is happening? If we are right, the consequence of the interfering behavior was actually reinforcing to this student because she is obtaining attention. The behavior is working for her, so she'll keep it up!

The team had some good information to develop a plan! Since they thought the function or reason for the behavior was to obtain attention from classmates, they taught our student how to tap classmates on the shoulder to obtain their attention. The staff even had her practice with the classmates, to make sure they engaged with the student when tapped on the shoulder. After being pinched, the classmates were glad to help with this plan. Our student found out the tapping worked, and she received the same consequence as the interfering behavior-attention! The team helped her obtain attention in an appropriate way.

Knowing the function of the behavior made all the difference.



What if the Behavior Plan is not working?

This sometimes happens. There is no black or white or right or wrong in the FBA process. Identifying the function or reason for the behavior results in a hypothesis or a best guess based on the data collected. Sometimes we are wrong and sometimes things change. There is a procedure to validate our hypothesis called Functional Analysis or FA. This is used when our FBA results are questionable. Its use may be more complicated than completing an FBA and often requires the assistance of someone with expertise in conducting the procedures, such as a Board-Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) or another professional with experience.

This is a good thing!

Don't panic or become upset if your school team asks to complete an FBA. It is one of the best ways to help your student. Should you have questions, don't hesitate to contact your school.

Resources:

To learn more about FBA click on the image!



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