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What Beginning Special Educators Need to Know About Conducting Functional Behavioral Assessments

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New—and often veteran—teachers find managing significant inappropriate student behavior a formidable challenge. Inappropriate student behavior can range from externalizing challenges (e.g., acting out, disrupting) to internalizing challenges (e.g., depression, anxiety, social withdrawal; Lewis, Jones, Horner, & Sugai, 2010). Teachers report that students who engage in high rates of inappropriate behavior are the most difficult students to teach, especially those who engage in externalizing patterns of inappropriate behavior (Harrison, Vannest, Davis, & Reynolds, 2012). Although more severe inappropriate behaviors, such as aggression, often receive attention in the professional literature, survey research has shown that the high frequency of milder inappropriate behaviors (e.g., disruptions, hyperactivity, distractibility, excessive movement, talking without permission) creates considerable challenges for educators (Harrison et al., 2012; Westwood & Graham, 2000).

Managing inappropriate student behaviors forces teachers to spend more time focusing on the behavior of a few students and less time on academic instruction and social-behavioral interactions with the majority of students (Gottfried & Harven, 2015). When challenging behavior does occur in the classroom, many teachers feel unprepared to intervene and alter student behavior (Wehby & Kern, 2014). In addition, the poor academic and postsecondary outcomes among students with significant behavioral challenges have been well documented, including poor academic achievement (Wiley, 2008),higher rates of school dropout (Rice & Yen, 2010), high rates of unemployment postschool, and higher rates of manifesting mental health concerns (Bradley, Doolittle, & Bartolotta, 2008).

Fortunately, a strong body of evidence-based practices, grounded in the principles and practices of applied behavior analysis (ABA), allow educators to address inappropriate student behavior. Understanding that behavior is functionally related to the learning environment gives educators the key to understanding inappropriate student behavior (Lewis, Mitchell, Harvey, Green, & McKenzie, 2015).

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Student behavior refers to observable, measurable student actions. The *learning environment* includes everything occurring before and after student behavior (Baer, Wolf, & Risley, 1987). A *functional relationship* means that if the student engages in inappropriate behavior, the environment (e.g., teachers, peers) will most likely respond in a predictable manner. In other words, students engage in inappropriate behavior because they can predict that teachers and others will respond in ways that meet their needs (i.e., their behavior serves a function). Therefore, addressing inappropriate student behavior involves hypothesizing the function of the inappropriate behavior by conducting a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) and designing plans that teach students appropriate behaviors to access the same or similar functional outcome.

Proven Practices

Decades of ABA research has demonstrated that behavior falls into regular and predictable patterns (Gage, Lewis, & Stichter, 2012). Student behavior can appear complex; however, viewing behavior as a series of interactions between a student and the surrounding environment reveals two underlying patterns: Students engage in behavior (inappropriate and appropriate) either to obtain what they find reinforcing or to escape what they find aversive (Gable, Park, & Scott, 2014). Although the consequences following a behavior may increase or decrease the frequency of the behavior, it is important to keep in mind that there are no such things as "universal" reinforcers or "universal" aversives. When determining the possible function of a student's behavior, it is important to suspend preconceived notions of what most students may find reinforcing or aversive.

Reinforcers and aversives are always defined by the action of the surrounding environment and its effect on the student's behavior (Alberto & Troutman, 2013). If, following a student behavior, the environment gives something to the student (e.g., attention, access to preferred items or activities) and the behavior maintains or increases in frequency, whatever the environment gave was, by definition, reinforcing. If, following a student behavior, the student is allowed to avoid or escape an environmental event or if the behavior results in the removal of the student from the setting and the student continues to engage in inappropriate behavior under similar conditions, whatever was happening or expected of the student prior to or during the episode of inappropriate student behavior is aversive to the student.

In addition to identifying the consequences (or outcomes) maintaining inappropriate student behavior, it is essential to identify any antecedent events prompting inappropriate student behavior (O'Neill, Albin, Storey, Horner, & Sprague, 2015). When teachers can accurately hypothesize the function of inappropriate student behavior and describe the context in which the behavior occurs, they can plan and implement effective interventions much more efficiently (Newcomer & Lewis, 2004).

FBAs allow special educators to create more efficient and effective behavior interventions. Using FBAs to guide behavior intervention plans is also a legal requirement of the

Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (2006). Specifically, if a child with a disability is suspended beyond 10 days of school due to problem behavior and it is determined that the problem behavior was a manifestation of the child's disability, the individualized education program team must do the following:

> (1) Either—
> (i) Conduct a functional behavioral assessment, unless the LEA had conducted a functional behavioral assessment before the behavior that resulted in the change of placement occurred, and implement a behavioral intervention plan for the child; or
> (ii) If a behavioral intervention plan already has been developed, review the behavioral intervention plan, and modify it, as necessary, to address the behavior; and
> (2) Except as provided in paragraph (g) of this section, return the child to the placement from which the child was removed, unless the parent and the LEA agree to a change of placement as part of the modification of the behavioral intervention plan. (IDEA Regulations, 2012, 34 CFR § 300.530[f])

Unfortunately, the current regulations requiring the completion of an FBA–behavior intervention plan (BIP) are linked to exclusionary discipline practices. However, as implied in the regulations (34 C.F.R. §300.503[1][i]) and in a recent letter from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (August 1, 2016), FBAs should be used prior to reaching a chronic pattern of problem behavior leading to the removal of the student from a free and appropriate public education.

Practice 1: FBA

FBAs assist educators in uncovering predictable patterns of antecedents, behaviors, and consequences (O'Neill et al., 2015). Analyzing data collected through an FBA allows educators to hypothesize the possible function that inappropriate behavior serves for the student (Lewis et al., 2015). FBAs typically involve gathering indirect data, generating a preliminary hypothesis, and using direct observation data to strengthen or alter the hypothesis (Weber, Killu, Derby, & Barretto, 2005).

Step 1: Gather indirect data. Prior to collecting any data, the teacher must operationally define the inappropriate behaviors in which the student engages. When operationally defining inappropriate behaviors, the teacher should break the behavior (e.g., disruption) into observable, measurable actions in which the student engages (e.g., talking without permission, tapping pencil, whistling; Sulzer-Azaroff & Mayer, 2012). See Table 1 for examples.

FBAs typically involve gathering indirect data, generating a preliminary hypothesis, and using direct observation data to strengthen or alter the hypothesis.

Indirect data collection may include, but is not limited to, rating scales, interviews, and archival reviews (Weber et al., 2005). Interviews allow educators to more precisely pinpoint when inappropriate student behavior is likely to occur, which increases the likelihood that direct observation assessments will note the context of the inappropriate behavior. Rating scales allow for the teacher and others to suggest a hypothesized function. Table 1 provides some resources for indirect data collection instruments. Archival data, such as attendance or behavioral infractions, can be useful in identifying possible setting event patterns. *Setting events* are things that happen outside the classroom or school day but may increase the likelihood of inappropriate student behavior occurring.

Step 2: Preliminary hypothesis development. The next step in the process is to examine the indirect data collected to develop a hypothesis about the function of the student's inappropriate behavior. When analyzing interview or rating scale data, follow the directions provided with the instrument to synthesize the collected information. When analyzing archival data, look for patterns across the school week or school day that have high rates of inappropriate student behavior, and then explore possible events that might be contributing (e.g., following weekends that a student is with a noncustodial parent, following nights that the student works late at a part-time job, following mornings that the student has had an argument with the parent about what to wear to school).

Hypotheses should be limited to statements regarding the conditions in which the student displays the inappropriate behavior and the possible functions of the behavior (i.e., attain reinforcement or escape aversives). Educators are often tempted to insert judgment or perceptions about patterns of behavior—for example, hypothesizing that the student is engaging in inappropriate behavior to gain "power" or "control" (Maag & Kemp, 2003). Unfortunately, beyond attaining reinforcement and escaping aversives, other possible functions have not been confirmed through research and do not lend themselves to intervention (i.e., educators do not want to give students the "power" to disrupt class). Strong FBA-based hypotheses should be structured as follows (with data collected to fill in the blanks; see Table 1 for examples):

- During/when [*insert condition*]
- Student will [*insert observable, measurable inappropriate student behavior*]
- To attain/escape [*insert functions*]

Table 1. Sample Functional Behavioral Assessment Scenarios

Element	Barb	Nancy	Mark	Eric
Inappropriate behavior	Disruptive • Talks out • Taps pencil	Verbally assaults peers • Uses profanity • Screams	Off-task • Out of seat	Physically assaults peers • Hits with closed fist • Kicks
Indirect observation methods	Anecdotal reports	Functional Assessment Interview Form	Informants Interview	Preliminary Functional Assessment Survey
Preliminary hypothesis	When asked to complete a written task, Barb will talk to peers and tap her pencil to get peer attention.	During recess, Nancy screams profanity to keep other students off the slide.	During direct instruction, Mark is out of his seat to gain peer attention.	During PE, Eric hits and kicks his peers to be sent to the office avoiding having to exercise.
Direct observation methods	A-B-C[a] model	Functional Assessment Observation Form	A-B-C[a] model and event recording	Functional Assessment Observation Form
Summary statement	When asked to complete a written math task, Barb will talk to her peers and tap her pencil to avoid doing the work.	During recess on Thursdays and every other Monday, Nancy screams profanity to get adult attention.	During direct instruction, Mark is out of his seat to gain peer attention.	During PE, Eric hits and kicks his peers to be sent to the office, avoiding having to exercise.

[a]Antecedent-behavior-consequence model.

Step 3: Direct data collection. In addition to indirect data, FBAs should always include a direct observation component conducted by someone with ABA expertise, such as a behavior analyst, school psychologist, or special education teacher. Having an additional person conduct the observation allows the primary educator to continue to teach and focus on all students, not just the student who is being assessed. Direct observations allow educators to strengthen or alter the possible functions of inappropriate student behavior as well as note under what conditions inappropriate student behavior and appropriate student behavior are more likely to occur. Direct observation will also help in identifying when inappropriate student behavior serves multiple functions. For example, a student may learn to be disruptive in class to be removed (escape/avoid), and, during the disruption, the student also receives a lot of teacher and peer attention (reinforce). See Table 1 for sample FBA development scenarios.

Practice 2: Positive Behavior Support Plans / BIPs

Once a hypothesis about the function of the student's inappropriate behavior is established, a positive behavior support plan (BSP) or BIP can be developed. All BSPs/BIPs should incorporate the following basic steps (Scott & Kamps, 2007):

1. Teach an appropriate replacement behavior that can lead to the same or similar function.
2. Alter the teaching environment to include prompts to use the replacement social behavior and allow the replacement behavior to achieve the same function (i.e., outcome) as the inappropriate student behavior.
3. Alter the teaching environment to withhold the previous maintaining consequence, such as removing teacher attention following the inappropriate behavior or not allowing the student to avoid work.

Teaching a replacement skill should follow effective social skill instruction, consisting of the following: (a) telling what the appropriate behavior is and when to use it (e.g., "When you get angry, the first thing to do is stop"), (b) showing what the skill looks like (e.g., examples and nonexamples of stopping), and (c) having the student practice through role-plays (Sugai & Lewis, 1996). If direct observation indicates that the student already demonstrates the appropriate behavior in some contexts, the teaching process may be less intensive.

The bigger challenge, and yet crucial for success, is altering the learning environment so that only the

replacement behavior can now access the function or outcome that the inappropriate behavior previously received. The student had learned that inappropriate behavior was often more efficient than appropriate behavior for obtaining the desired outcome. The learning environment should no longer allow students to access the previous outcome (i.e., function) if they engage in the inappropriate behavior. In other words, the environment should not "feed the function" of the inappropriate student behavior. In essence, BSPs/BIPs should contain multiple intervention points to compete with the current learned pattern of behavior, making it more efficient and effective for the student to use the appropriate behavior to get the desired outcome (McIntosh & Av-Gay, 2007; Scott, Anderson, & Spaulding, 2008).

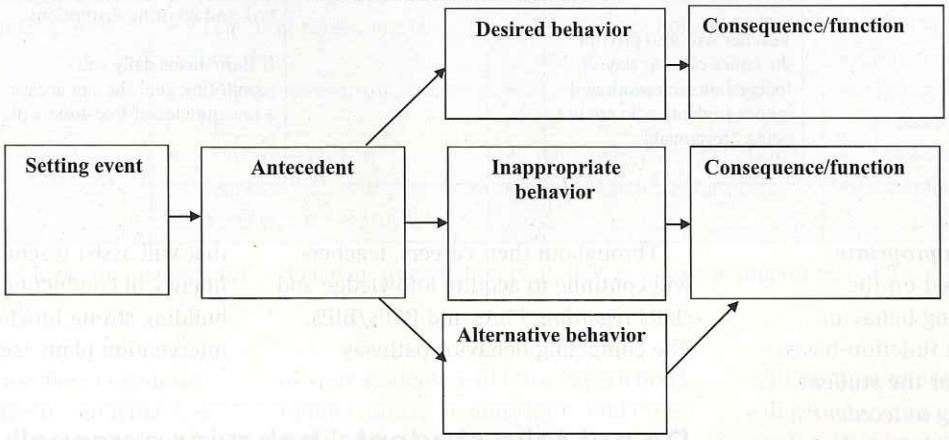
The competing pathways and intervention plan worksheet (see Figure 1) guides teachers in planning a comprehensive BSP or BIP (Sugai, Lewis-Palmer, & Hagan-Burke, 1999). It is completed in three steps: filling in components from the FBA (i.e., setting events, antecedents, inappropriate student behavior, and consequence/function), determining replacement behaviors, and selecting appropriate interventions. Once the hypothesis is developed, educators must include interventions across the sequence of behavior events.

Step 1: Fill in the components from the FBA. Begin by filling in the antecedent, behavior, and consequence (function) from the hypothesis generated in the FBA process. If any setting events were identified, add them to the worksheet. See Figure 2 for an example of an FBA summary within the flowchart.

Step 2: Determine replacement behaviors. To complete the behavior pathway, identify replacement behaviors. The *desired behavior* refers to what the student should do instead of the current inappropriate student behavior. To identify the desired behavior, think of flipping the inappropriate student behavior into an appropriate one. Determine the consequences (function) associated with the desired behavior. Unless the function of the desired behavior matches the function of the inappropriate student behavior, an alternative behavior must be identified. Select as an alternative behavior an appropriate student behavior resulting in the same consequence (function) as the inappropriate student behavior (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Competing pathways functional behavioral assessment summary and behavior intervention plan worksheet

Functional Behavioral Assessment

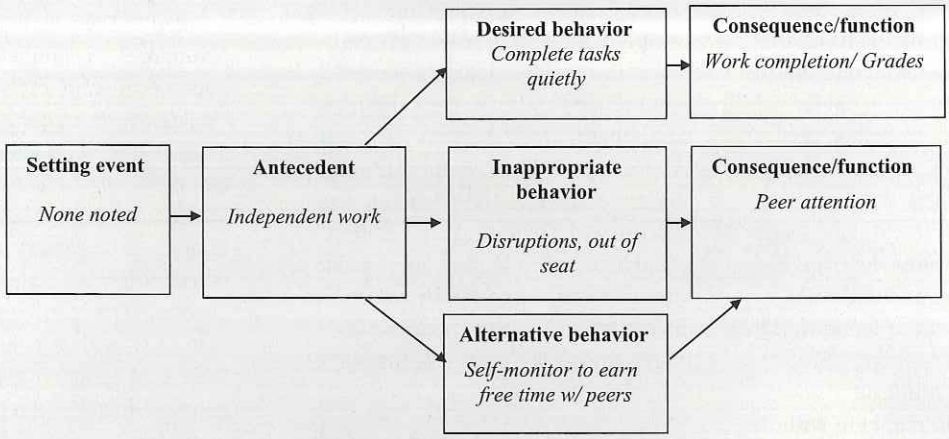


Function-based intervention plan

Setting event strategies	**Manipulate antecedent** to prevent problem and prompt alternate/desired behavior	**Teach behavior** Explicitly teach alternate and desired behaviors	**Alter consequences** to reinforce alternate and desired behavior and extinguish negative behavior

Figure 2. Example of a completed competing pathway and intervention plan

Functional Behavioral Assessment



Function-based intervention plan

Setting event strategies	**Manipulate antecedent** to prevent problem and prompt alternate/desired behavior	**Teach behavior** Explicitly teach alternate and desired behaviors	**Alter consequences** to reinforce alternate and desired behavior and extinguish negative behavior
	Prior to start of independent work time, teacher will remind Barb of the appropriate behavior and the related outcome (earned free time with peers). Teacher will also prompt the entire class to stay focused on their work and ignore students who are not being "responsible."	Teach social skills to appropriately access peer attention. Teach student how to self-monitor "on-task."	Teacher will periodically provide Barb feedback related to staying on-task. Teacher will provide feedback to the class for also staying on-task and ignoring disruptions. If Barb meets daily self-monitoring goal she can access a few minutes of free-time with peers.

Step 3: Select appropriate interventions. Based on the completed competing behavior pathway, develop a function-based intervention plan for the student. Begin by identifying *antecedent manipulations*, which include any changes to the learning environment necessary to prevent inappropriate behavior and to prompt the desired and alternative behaviors. Next, identify procedures for explicitly teaching the desired and alternative behaviors. Then, identify necessary alterations to the consequences for all behaviors in the pathway. *Consequence alterations* include any changes to the learning environment necessary to maintain the desired and alternative behaviors that will extinguish the inappropriate student behavior (see Figure 2).

Throughout their careers, teachers will continue to acquire knowledge and skills regarding FBAs and BSPs/BIPs. The competing behavior pathway model described here can serve as a strategy to map out essential features of interventions based on the function of the student's inappropriate behavior. The intent of this article is to provide the basics of FBA and behavior plan development. Fortunately, there are several great resources that can provide more depth and breadth of information that will assist teachers in developing fluency in conducting FBAs and building strong function-based intervention plans (see Table 2).

Do not take students' behavior personally. Sure, they are calling you and your mother horrible names and threatening to trash your classroom, but try to view it is as a learning error.

A Few Words of Advice

Both veteran and beginning special education teachers will face behavioral challenges throughout their careers. Unfortunately, addressing inappropriate student behavior continues to be one of the leading reasons why educators leave the profession (Sass, Seal, &

Table 2. Recommended Resources

Element	Resource 1	Resource 2	Resource 3
Title	*Applied Behavior Analysis for Teachers*	*Functional Assessment and Program Development for Problem Behavior: A Practical Handbook*	*Functional Behavioral Assessment and Function-Based Interventions: An Effective, Practical Approach*
Authors	Alberto & Troutman	O'Neill, Albin, Storey, Horner, & Sprague	Umbreit, Ferro, Liaupsin, & Lane
Audience	Teachers with little or no ABA knowledge. Teachers interested in learning how to use ABA in classroom settings.	Teachers with some ABA knowledge. Teachers who regularly assist with FBAs and BSPs/BIPs.	Teachers with some ABA knowledge. Teachers who regularly assist with FBAs and BSPs/BIPs.
Indirect observation tools	• Anecdotal reports • Permanent product recording	• Functional Assessment Interview Form • Student-Directed Functional Assessment Interview Form	• Informants Interview • Preliminary Functional Assessment Survey • Student-Assisted Functional Assessment Interview
Direct observation tools	• Event recording • Interval recording • Time sampling • Duration recording • Latency recording	• Functional Assessment Observation Form	• Antecedent-behavior-consequence model
Intervention planning tools	• Teaching replacement behavior • Consequences to increase behavior • Consequences to decrease behavior • Antecedent control	• Competing behavior model • Teaching replacement behavior • Antecedent interventions • Contingency alterations	• Decision model • Function matrix • Teach the replacement behavior • Improve the environment • Change the contingencies

Note. ABA = applied behavior analysis; BIP = behavior intervention plan; BSP = behavior support plan; FBA = functional behavioral assessment.

Martin, 2010). As teachers encounter challenges presented by students, it is really important to remember three things. First, do not take students' behavior personally. Sure, they are calling you and your mother horrible names and threatening to trash your classroom, but try to view it is as a learning error. You would not take students making math errors as a personal affront; you would assess why they are making the error, reteach the concept, provide opportunities to practice, and acknowledge and celebrate when they master the skill. Second, keep the focus on what can be controlled within your classroom and across the student's school day. Some of your students will have experienced trauma, abuse, malnutrition, and other risk factors that may contribute to frequent academic and social failure. Remember, as an educator, you cannot undo prior harm; however, you can build school environments, using the logic of FBA, to meet students' needs and increase the likelihood that they are successful.

Finally, if you misread the function or you forget and inadvertently reinforce the inappropriate student behavior and not the replacement behavior, do not panic, do not get discouraged, and do not view the event as your failure. There is one certainty in working with children and youth with disabilities and those at risk: You will get many more opportunities to practice implementation of function-based interventions.

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