Functional Behavioral Assessment

Overview of Instruments

Federal law requires functional behavioral assessment to be part of disciplinary procedures (manifest determinations). These guidelines apply to all students in special education, including those with autism; however, there are other times when determining the purpose or function of a behavior is beneficial.

A functional behavioral assessment, or FBA, is used to better understand the pattern and purpose, or function, of a behavior. Horner and Carr (1997) defined FBA as “a method for identifying the variables that reliably predict and maintain problem behavior” (p. 84). The goal of FBA is to identify events that precede (antecedents) and follow (consequences) a behavior. Careful analysis of antecedents, behavior, and consequences (the ABCs) provides insight into the purpose or function of a behavior. It is important to understand the function of a behavior in order to develop more effective interventions. Indeed, research has demonstrated that the use of FBA increases the effectiveness of interventions (Carr et al., 1999; Ellingson, Miltenberger, Stricker, Galensky, & Garlinghouse, 2000).

According to Gresham, Watson, and Skinner (2001), “FBA is not a single test or observation, but rather a multimethod strategy” (p. 158). A thorough FBA includes interviews with parents, teachers, and the student; classroom observations; and a review of records. At times, understanding the purpose of the behavior also requires altering elements in the environment to see how behavior changes; this is known as functional analysis.

According to Grossman and Aspy (2011), considering patterns of behavior through FBA is useful but has one important limitation: The FBA model focuses exclusively on observable behaviors without consideration of the underlying autism spectrum disorder. Others have argued that biological factors such as hunger or anxiety (Carr, 1994) and diagnostic characteristics and genetic conditions (Reese, Richman, Zarcone, & Zarcone, 2003) should be incorporated when examining behavior. In the case of the latter, the authors noted, “An evaluation of the interaction between diagnostic characteristics and environmental events may lead to a more individualized functional assessment of challenging behavior displayed by young children with autism” (Reese et al., 2003, p. 88). Grossman and Aspy (2011) assert that characteristics of autism spectrum disorder contribute to the observed behaviors and conclude that it is, therefore, important to consider the ASD characteristics.
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Failure to understand or consider these characteristics when designing behavior interventions presents risks for students, as described by Grossman and Aspy.

Those who do not understand the characteristics of autism are likely to perceive individuals with the disorder as being poorly behaved or as “needing more discipline.” It is critical for teachers, parents, and others in helping roles to be able to recognize characteristics of autism spectrum disorder that underlie challenging behaviors. Not all behavioral difficulties are related to the underlying disorder. Indeed, individuals with ASD may willfully choose to engage in inappropriate behaviors; however, *misinterpreting behaviors as willful when they are not carries great risks*. A history of being punished for behavior that is related to an underlying disorder may result in low self-esteem, hopelessness, depression, and a lack of opportunity to learn alternative behaviors. *When in doubt, it is best to respond to a behavioral difficulty as if it is related to the underlying ASD*. For this reason, those who wish to design effective behavior interventions must know the characteristics of the disorder.

Functional behavioral assessment is a useful tool when used by those who understand ASD. Many instruments for functional behavioral assessments have been developed. The following section summarizes some instruments that facilitate the process of completing an FBA.

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<th>Misconceptions</th>
<th>Myth</th>
<th>Reality</th>
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<td>FBA is an intervention.</td>
<td>FBA is a process for understanding the purpose of behavior; it assists in developing interventions.</td>
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<td>Because FBAs are conducted routinely, they do not require parental consent.</td>
<td>FBAs are a form of assessment that require parental consent.</td>
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<td>FBAs are conducted only for manifestation determinations.</td>
<td>While is true that an FBA is required to conduct a manifestation determination, Sugai and Horner (1999-2000) note that the main purpose of an FBA is to develop a more effective intervention plan and, therefore, is not limited to use in such instances.</td>
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“Control,” “bullying,” and “anger management” may sometimes be the function of a behavior. These labels are inappropriate because they are not behavioral concepts, and they blame the student (Sugai & Horner, n.d.).

References


Resources and Materials


This website discusses when a functional behavior assessment is needed and the steps to complete this procedure.


*This publication discusses characteristics of ASD and assessment across multiple areas, including achievement.*