

Functional Behavioral Assessment

Overview of Instruments

Functional behavioral assessment is required by federal law as 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 of parents, teachers, student, classroom observations, and 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 (in press), 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 (in press) assert that characteristics of autism contribute to the observed behaviors and conclude that it is, therefore, important to consider the ASD. 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 that underlie challenging behaviors. Not all behavioral difficulties are related to the underlying disorder. Indeed, individuals with AU 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 autism*. 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 autism. Many instruments for functional behavioral assessments have been developed. The following section summarizes some instruments that facilitate the process of completing an FBA.

ABC-ICEBERG (ABC-I)

The ABC-Iceberg (ABC-I; Aspy & Grossman, 2007a) is a form used to examine the antecedents, behaviors, and consequences observed and consider the characteristics of autism as they relate to the observed behavior. The tool is used in conjunction with the Underlying Characteristics Checklist (UCC; Aspy & Grossman, 2007b). The purpose of the ABC-I is to develop comprehensive interventions that target behaviors in addition to core features of autism

FUNCTIONAL ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST: TEACHERS AND STAFF (FACTS)

The Functional Assessment Checklist: Teachers and Staff (FACTS; March, Horner, Lewis-Palmer, Brown, Crone, Todd, et al., 2000) is a semi-structured brief interview used to conduct a functional assessment or develop an intervention plan. Informants are provided with response choices or can provide their own responses. The FACTS, which consists of two parts, can be completed in approximately 5 to 15 minutes.

FUNCTIONAL ASSESSMENT INTERVIEW FORM (FAI)

The Functional Assessment Interview Form (FAI; O'Neill et al., 1997) is a structured interview designed to gather information about a behavior and the circumstances under which it occurs. The interview consists of 11 sections that help caregivers/teachers describe the behavior, identify antecedents and consequences, and identify medical conditions. The interview also inquires about an individual's communication skills, successful and unsuccessful teaching strategies and activities; effective reinforcers, interventions previously attempted, and developed hypotheses.

MOTIVATION ASSESSMENT SCALE (MAS)

The Motivation Assessment Scale (MAS; Durand & Crimmins, 1992) is designed to identify the function of a target behavior. It consists of 16 items presented in a checklist/questionnaire format. MAS items describe specific situations, and the respondent rates how likely the target behavior is to occur. Items assist in identifying the function of a behavior based on four categories: sensory, escape, attention, and tangible.

STUDENT-DIRECTED FUNCTIONAL ASSESSMENT INTERVIEW FORM (SDFAI)

The Student-Directed Functional Assessment Interview Form (SDFAI; O'Neill et al., 1997) is a structured interview conducted with the student in an effort to understand the student's perspective on the circumstances related to a specific behavior of concern. The interview takes 20-40 minutes and is conducted by an adult who has a positive relationship with the student.

The interview results in summary statements outlining the antecedents, consequences, and function of behavior.

Summary of Functional Behavioral Assessment Instruments

| Name of Tool/ Author (Year) | Age Range | Method Administration/ Format | Approximate Time to Administer | Subscale | Availability |
|--|--------------|--|---|----------|--|
| ABC-Iceberg (ABC-I) Aspy & Grossman (2007a) | N/A | Interview/observation The second portion of the ABC-I requires a completed questionnaire (Underlying Characteristics Checklist) | 15-30 min. | N/A | The ABC-I is contained in the Ziggurat Model book (Aspy & Grossman, 2007). Autism Asperger Publishing Company. www.asperger.net |
| Functional Assessment Checklist: Teachers and Staff (FACTS) March, Horner, Lewis-Palmer, Brown, Crone, Todd et al. (2000) | N/A | Interview format The interview results in a summary of behavior | 5-15 min. | N/A | National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) http://www.pbis.org/pbis_resource_detail_page.aspx?TypeID=4&PBIS_ResourceID=246 |

| Name of Tool/ Author (Year) | Age Range | Method Administration/ Format | Approximate Time to Administer | Subscale | Availability |
|--|--------------|--|---|----------|---|
| Student-Directed Functional Assessment Interview (SDFAI) O’Neill et al. (1997) | N/A | Interview with the student conducted by an adult The interview results in a summary statement regarding the behavior | 20-40 min. | N/A | In O’Neill et al. Functional assessment and programming developed for problem behavior: A practical handbook. Cengage Learning. http://www.cengage.com/search/productOverview.do?Ntt=O%27Neill%2019780534260224&Ntk=all P_isbn13&N=+16 |

Research on Assessment Instruments and the FBA Process

FUNCTIONAL ASSESSMENT INTERVIEW

| Author (Year) | Age Range (in years) | Sample Size | Topic Addressed | Outcome |
|---|-------------------------|-------------|-----------------|---------|
| Reese, Richman, Zarcone, & Zarcone (2003) | .5-5 | 100 | Validity | Mixed |

MOTIVATION ASSESSMENT SCALE (MAS)

| Author (Year) | Age Range (in years) | Sample Size | Topic Addressed | Outcome |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|-------------|---------------------|---------|
| Cunningham & O'Neill (2000) | 3-5 | 3 | Concurrent validity | + |

Misconceptions

| Myth | Reality |
|--|---|
| FBA is an intervention. | FBA is a process for understanding the purpose of behavior; it assists in developing interventions. |
| Because FBAs are conducted routinely, they do not require parental consent. | FBAs are a form of assessment that require parental consent. |
| FBAs are conducted only for manifestation determinations. | 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. |
| “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

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Resources and Materials

Reese, R. M., Richman, D. M., Zarcone, J., & Zarcone, T. (2003). Individualizing functional assessments for children with autism: The contributors of perseverative behavior and sensory disturbances to disruptive behavior. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 1*, 87-92.

Council for Exceptional Children. (2008). *Conducting a functional behavior assessment*. Retrieved November 23, 2008, from FAPE: Helping Parents and Advocates Improve Educational Results for Children with Disabilities Web site:

http://www.fape.org/idea/what_idea_is/osher/main.htm

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

Cunningham, E., & O'Neill, E. (2000). Comparison of results of functional assessment and analysis methods with young children with autism. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, 35*(4), 406-414.

National Education Association. (2008). *The puzzle of autism*. Retrieved November 23, 2008, from Autism Society of America Web site: <http://www.autism-society.org/site/DocServer/autismpuzzle.pdf?docID=3821>

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