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Functional Behavioral Assessment and Positive Interventions: What Parents Need to Know

By Dixie Jordan

Many children have inappropriate behaviors that are part of their disability. These behaviors may make it difficult to learn, cause harm to the child or others, or isolate a child from his or her peers. Some children have behaviors that they can't control, such as tics for a child with Tourette syndrome or self-harming behaviors for some children with developmental disabilities. Some children may be sad or anxious. Others simply have not learned positive ways to have their needs met. In any of these instances, the behaviors interfere with the children's ability to learn the skills they need to be successful.

We can teach appropriate behavior skills to children! To do so, we need to understand problem behaviors, such as where they occur and what purpose they serve for a child. The process of learning about how children develop problem behaviors is called *functional behavioral assessment (FBA)*. If we learn about the behaviors and know when and where they are likely to happen, we can plan positive strategies to teach new behaviors. These strategies are called *positive behavioral interventions*. Teachers and parents will use the information from an FBA to help a child learn new skills. The goal is to teach children how to manage their own behaviors.

This overview will help parents understand functional behavioral assessments and positive interventions. You have a very important role in this assessment, because you have information about your child that no one else has. When you understand the process, you can work effectively with the rest of the team. You will have the tools to make decisions when a functional behavioral assessment is proposed for your child. What you know about your child will be used to help develop effective instruction.

Thinking about behavior

Adults often have two different approaches to dealing with problem behaviors. These different approaches are based on different beliefs. One belief is that the child *is a problem*, and the other is that the child *has a problem*.

The child is a problem

Billy is a 12-year-old sixth-grade student. He refuses to do his schoolwork, and then his teacher does not know what to do. He becomes angry when the teacher reminds him to get to work. He screams, swears, and even throws his work on the floor so the teacher will leave him alone. The teacher may think Billy is lazy, mean, or disrespectful. The teacher may feel angry or threatened. Adults who are angry often use punishment or threats: "Do it or else." We do not always realize that children do not think about their problem behaviors the way we do.

When we punish often, children may see us as uncaring. Some may come to fear or avoid us. Others may become even louder and angrier because of the punishment. Children who do not back down when arguing with adults often receive increasingly harsh punishments. Many adults think children should not be permitted to win disagreements. Children, on the other hand, often say things they do not really mean because they are angry. They may refuse to give up even if they lose privileges or are suspended from school.

When a child is suspended from school for problem behaviors, some people think of it as "good medicine for bad behavior." They think the removal teaches the child a lesson and that the child will change the problem behaviors as a result.

But what if that child does not like going to school? He or she may learn that using problem behaviors is a good way to earn a vacation from school. The child may actually

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want what we think is a punishment.

The child has a problem

Billy, the 12-year-old described earlier, has behaviors that need to change. Let's assume we have assessment data that give a clearer picture of Billy. We find that he reads at a second-grade level. He was sexually abused at age three by a neighbor. Billy is angry over his parents' recent divorce and continuing custody battle. He is worried about where he will live.

Clearly Billy's problem behaviors must change. They are serious and interfere with learning. What we decide to do about the behavior, however, comes from how we feel about it and whether we believe it is willful. That is where a functional behavioral assessment comes in. It can help us to identify why Billy is frustrated and angry, so we can help him to learn the skills he needs. A reasonable person would have a hard time believing that punishment alone could help Billy succeed.

Positive Behavioral Interventions

> ***Positive:*** characterized by or displaying approval, acceptance, or affirmation.
>
> ***Behavior:*** what we do.
>
> ***Intervention:*** an action that changes a course of events.

(Adapted from Merriam Webster's Tenth Collegiate Dictionary.)

The 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) states:

The IEP Team shall, in the case of a child whose behavior impedes the child's learning or that of others, consider the use of positive behavioral interventions and supports, and other strategies, to address that behavior.
IDEA Section 614 (d)

Positive behavioral interventions are used *before* problem behaviors occur. To develop positive interventions, the team must understand why a child has problem behaviors and what strategies might be helpful. Many different strategies can be used to reduce problem behaviors in school: changing where a child sits in the classroom, adjusting the schoolwork, rewarding the child for positive behaviors. The child's teacher may speak in a different tone of voice to help the child remain calm. Adults may try to keep calm when the child is angry. The goal is to stop or reduce the problem behaviors so that punishment does not become necessary.

Here is an example: The teacher knows that Mary is more likely to argue with the teacher when she sits next to Mark. If the teacher thinks Mary argues because she wants Mark to notice her, there are several things the teacher can do. She can separate Mary and Mark so that Mary does not try so hard to get his attention. She can also teach Mary more positive ways to gain Mark's attention and provide positive reinforcement for using the new behaviors.

Behaviors are governed by their consequences

John has a fight (behavior) and is suspended from school (consequence). If John loves school and can control the behavior, the consequence is negative because he has to give up something he wants (school). If John dislikes school, however, he may see that same consequence as positive. He may learn that fighting is a good way to be sent home. The next time John does not want to be in school, what behavior is he likely to use?

Many of us have learned to deal with problem behaviors by doing nothing until they occur. After a child uses the behaviors, we punish. Punishment does not teach new skills, though. Its goal is to stop problem behaviors from continuing. If we do not teach a child what to do instead, the child will probably continue to misbehave. Any time a child uses a behavior that is successful in meeting a need, the behavior is likely to be repeated. The behavior serves a *function* for the child.

Most people agree that we need to have consequences for problem behaviors. We must also focus on teaching the positive behavior skills we would like to see. If we can understand the function of problem behaviors, we can teach a child more positive behaviors that serve the same function, and the problem behaviors are no longer needed.

What is a functional behavioral assessment?

A Functional behavioral assessment (FBA) is a process for collecting information. The data the team collects are used to help determine why problem behaviors occur. The data will also help identify ways to address the behaviors. Functional behavioral assessment data are used to develop a positive behavioral intervention plan. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 specifically requires an FBA whenever a child with a disability has his or her current placement changed for disciplinary reasons. This does not mean that we should not think about FBA at other times, too.

The evaluation requirements of IDEA make it clear that children must be evaluated in all areas related to the suspected disability. This means that if your child has problem behaviors that are not improving, your child may

need an evaluation to examine the behaviors more closely. You may request a FBA at any time if your child's problem behaviors are becoming worse, or when the team cannot explain to you why the problem behaviors occur.

There are many reasons a child might misbehave. Some have to do with the nature of the child, such as allergies to dust, foods, or plants. A sinus infection, headache, or toothache can also lead to problem behaviors. Some children have a medical diagnosis, such as bipolar disorder or attention-deficit/hyper-activity disorder that affects behavior. The team's responsibility is to collect data to help it understand why a child has problem behaviors.

The people who complete the functional behavioral assessment use different ways to collect data. School staff may interview you and your child. They observe your child in different settings, such as the lunchroom or classroom, or on the playground. They gather reports from teachers and others. The team reviews your child's records, including any assessments you would like to share.

The results of this process should lead to a *hypothesis* about why problem behaviors occur. A hypothesis is an educated guess, based on the data the team has gathered. Assessment results are used to develop a positive behavior intervention plan.

Behaviors are context-related

Most behaviors are related to their context. This means that behaviors often result from what is happening in the child's world or environment. These are just a few of the factors that may lead to problem behaviors:

- a disagreement between children
- the number of children in a classroom
- the quality of peer relationships
- the size of the classroom
- medicine changes
- the difficulty of schoolwork

Other things, such as whom is present and what their expectations are, also affect behaviors. Behaviors may also be a problem when a child is emotionally upset and cannot handle the demands of the environment.

Behaviors serve a function

Problem behaviors usually serve a function, or purpose, for the child. Sometimes we see problem behaviors when a substitute teacher is in the classroom. In this case, we must be careful not to assume that the child doesn't like the teacher or that the child wants to show off for friends. Perhaps the child likes his or her regular teacher and is upset when she is not there. Or the child may be anxious about what to expect with a new teacher. A child who is upset about having a new teacher may use problem behaviors in order to be placed in a less stressful setting. Some children would rather be in a time-out space than in their classroom.

Unfortunately, consequences that improve the behaviors of most students do not work with all. Sending a child to the principal's office, for example, can be ineffective if the consequence does not address the complex function of a child's behavior.

What a child does (the behavior) and *why* a child does it (the function) may be unrelated. Skipping school and getting good grades are two very different behaviors. Yet they may serve the same function for different children—gaining adult attention. Two children may both want to be noticed by their parents; one may study hard to have good grades while the other skips class. They do very different things to get the attention they want. While the function of both behaviors is positive (parent attention), skipping class is not an acceptable way to be noticed.

Behaviors are influenced by events in the environment (antecedents)

What happens in an environment affects behavior. The size of a classroom, the number of students, transitions, or early morning bus incidents are all antecedents that might affect a child's behavior.

It is important to know what leads to both positive and negative behaviors. If teachers and parents understand the conditions that lead to problem behaviors, then changing the conditions may reduce the need for the behaviors. Positive teaching strategies such as providing structure, routine, and rewards for appropriate behaviors help to increase positive behavior skills.

Steps in conducting a functional behavioral assessment

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 does not define how a functional behavioral assessment is done. The process may vary with the needs of each child. However, several specific steps are always part of this kind of assessment. The process begins with identifying the specific behaviors that must change. If a child has many problem behaviors, it will be important to focus on the most serious one or two behaviors. The problem behaviors are described in a way that helps everyone to understand exactly what the behaviors are. These are typical steps:

1. Identify and agree on the behavior(s) that most need to change.

2. Determine where the behaviors occur and where they do not. Identify what may contribute to the behaviors. The team will ask these kinds of questions:

- What is unique about the environments where behaviors are not a concern?
- What is different in the places where the problem behaviors do occur? Could they be related to how the child and teacher get along? Does the number of other students or the work a child is asked to do cause the problem? Could the time of day or a child's mood affect the behaviors? Was there a bus problem or a disagreement in the hallway?
- Are the behaviors likely to occur in a specific set of circumstances or a specific setting? What events seem to support the problem behaviors?

3. Collect data on the child's performance from as many sources as possible.

4. Develop a hypothesis about why problem behaviors occur (the function of the behaviors). A hypothesis is an educated guess, based on data. It helps predict where and why problem behaviors are most likely to occur, and where and why they are least likely to occur.

5. Identify other behaviors that can be taught that will serve the same function for the child.

6. Test the hypothesis. The team develops and uses positive behavioral interventions that are written into the child's IEP or behavior intervention plan.

7. Evaluate the success of the interventions. Change or fine-tune as needed.

If children have behaviors that place them or others in danger, they may need a crisis intervention plan. Crisis interventions should be developed before they are needed. The team should decide what behaviors are crises and what they (and the child) will do in a crisis. By having a plan that guides actions, teachers can help children through difficult emotional situations.

Behavior intervention plan

An effective behavior intervention plan (often called a behavior support plan or positive intervention plan) is used to teach or reinforce positive behaviors. Typically, a child's team develops the plan. It usually includes:

- skills training to increase appropriate behavior
- changes that will be made in classrooms or other environments to reduce or eliminate problem behaviors
- strategies to replace problem behaviors with appropriate behaviors that serve the same function for the child
- supports for the child to use the appropriate behaviors

A positive behavior intervention plan is not a plan to determine what happens to a student who violates a rule or code of conduct. That would be more appropriately called a discipline plan or a punishment plan.

School discipline policies

The IEP team determines whether the school discipline policies need to be amended for a child, or whether the consequences need to be different from those written into the policy. This decision should be based on evaluation and a review of the records, including the discipline records or any manifestation determination review(s) that have been completed by the school. A child's IEP or behavior intervention plan should focus on teaching skills.

Sometimes school discipline policies are not successful in correcting problem behaviors. That is, the child does not learn what the school staff intended through the use of punishments such as suspension. The child may learn instead that problem behaviors are useful in meeting a need, such as being noticed by peers. When this is true, it is difficult to defend punishment, by itself, as effective in changing problem behaviors.

One of the most useful questions parents can ask when they have concerns about the discipline recommendations for their child is "Where are the data that support the recommendations?" Special education decisions are based on data. If school staff wants to use a specific discipline procedure, they should check for data that support the use of the procedure. For instance, if your child has been repeatedly suspended from school for a problem behavior, has suspension taught your child the skills he or she needs to learn?

Zero-tolerance policies

Many school districts have zero-tolerance policies that provide immediate negative consequences for specific behaviors. Such policies simply do not provide effective consequences for all children who violate them. If a child with a disability violates a zero-tolerance policy, the consequence may or may not be effective, given that child's needs. Consequences for problem behaviors must not discriminate against a child based on his or her disability. The IEP team is responsible for determining whether exceptions need to be made to the written school district discipline policy for a student, or whether the student needs

a different consequence for misbehaviors than is written into the school discipline policies. Instructional goals may need to be written into the IEP to help remediate the problems a child is having in following school discipline policies.

While some administrators may not want to make exceptions to schoolwide discipline policies established for all students, exceptions are sometimes necessary. Some students who are unable to conform their behavior to the school expectations may need to have individualized consequences that will be more effective in supporting positive behaviors.

In the U.S. legal system, the consequences for breaking a law are generally based on an evaluation of the events around the violation. Yet schools often have one discipline standard for all students regardless of individual needs. They may use the same consequences for all students. Parents must carefully examine school policies to help determine whether modifications need to be made to meet the needs of their child.

Examples of behavioral intervention strategies

Schools use the following common strategies to help reduce problem behaviors and teach children positive behavioral skills.

Stop, Relax, and Think teaches children how to think about the problem they are having and find a solution. Children learn the steps:

1. Define the problem.
2. Decide who "owns" the problem.
3. Think of as many solutions as possible to solve the problem.
4. Select a solution to try.
5. Use the solution.
6. Evaluate its success.

After children understand the steps, role-play and practice can help the process become habit. Helping children to recognize their own response to stress (clenched hands, voice tone, etc.) may become part of the instruction needed to use this strategy effectively.

Planned ignoring is useful in stopping behaviors that are annoying. For example, it is useful for students who yell or interrupt the class to attract the teacher's attention or that of students who are not prepared for class. Planned ignoring acknowledges that children's problem behaviors serve a function. If the purpose of a problem behavior is to gain adult attention, then not providing attention means that the behavior does not work. The behavior lessens over time and eventually disappears. Ignoring nonserious behavior is especially useful for parents when their child is having a tantrum for attention. Many adults find it difficult to ignore behaviors, however, especially if the behaviors interrupt what the adult is doing. Also, attention-seeking behaviors often get worse before they eventually go away.

Planned ignoring is not suitable for behaviors that are extremely disruptive. It also may not work if other children laugh at the problem behaviors the adult is trying to ignore. Some behaviors, including those that are unsafe or that include peer issues such as arguing, can grow quickly into more serious behaviors. It may not be possible to ignore these kinds of behaviors. Planned ignoring should never be used for unsafe behaviors. As children grow older and want attention more from their friends than from adults, planned ignoring is less useful.

Preventive cueing (also called signal interference) lets a child know when he or she is doing something that is not acceptable. Teachers or parents can frown, shake their head, make eye contact, point to a seat for a wandering child, or snap their fingers, to let the child know he or she needs to pay attention or to stop the problem behaviors. When using preventive cueing it is important not to smile or look pleased with a child. Preventive cueing may be used in steps, depending on the behaviors and how often they occur or how serious they are. For instance, a hand motion may work the first time or two, but it may need to be combined with eye contact or a shake of the head for the next offense.

Proximity control means that a teacher or adult moves closer to the child in a gentle way. If the teacher does not get the child's attention by using cues, then he or she may move closer to the student or give the lesson while standing near the child's desk.

Touch control, meaning touch that is not resisted, is a nonverbal guided intervention. It is used to direct a student toward positive behavior. For example, a teacher may gently place a hand on a child's shoulder to steer the child back to his or her desk. Touch control should never be used with children who react angrily or when school policy does not permit its use. If a child's records show that he or she has a history of violence, has been abused or maltreated, is anxious, or has a mental illness or psychosis, touch control should not be used, unless specifically agreed to by a physician or psychologist.

Humor directed either at the teacher or the situation—never at the child—can defuse tensions as well as redirect children. Humor must never be used to demean a child or be used in a manner that might encourage others in the class to ridicule the child.

Nonverbal warnings give a child the opportunity to regain control without being singled out for a verbal reprimand. For example, a teacher might place a colored warning cue card or a note on a desk as he or she moves through the room, or hold up the number of fingers that corresponds to the rule being challenged.

Discipline privately. Many children see it as a challenge when teachers attempt to discipline them in front of their peers. Children rarely lose these challenges, even when adults use negative consequences. Young people can gain stature from peers by publicly refusing to obey a teacher. A child is more likely to accept discipline if his or her peers are not watching the process.

Positive phrasing lets children know the positive results for using appropriate behaviors. As simple as it sounds, this can be difficult. Teachers and parents are used to focusing on misbehavior. Warning children about a negative response to problem behaviors often seems easier than describing the positive impact of positive behaviors. Compare the difference between positive phrasing and negative phrasing:

> ***Positive phrasing:*** "If you finish your reading by recess, we can all go outside together and play a game."
>
> ***Negative phrasing:*** "If you do not finish your reading by recess, you will have to stay inside until it's done."

Positive phrasing helps children learn that positive behaviors lead to positive outcomes. This, in turn, can help them gain control of their behaviors.

I-messages, described by Thomas Gordon in his 1974 book Teacher Effectiveness Training, helps children learn about how their problem behaviors affect others. It also demonstrates the importance of taking responsibility for one's own behavior. For example, parents or teachers will use language like "I'm upset when . . ." not "You are bad when . . ."

When a child has a good relationship with parents and teachers, I-messages can help him or her to understand how the problem behaviors affect adults. If the child dislikes the teacher, though, using I-statements can be a problem. It may even help the child to more effectively annoy the teacher.

Behavior shaping acknowledges that not all children can do everything at 100 percent. If a child does not turn in papers daily, expecting that papers will be turned in 100 percent of the time is not realistic. By rewarding small gains and reinforcing the gains as they occur, children learn how to stick with a task and to improve the skill.

Clear routines and expectations let children know what comes next in their school day, reducing anxiety or fear. Teachers who post and review the rules daily establish expectations for behavior during the day.

For additional information on positive behavioral interventions and functional behavioral assessment as well as related topics, contact the following:

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