Conducting a Functional Behavior Assessment: A Technical Handbook

This document will provide readers with general information regarding the process of completing a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA). This document does not replace or serve as an alternative to the in-depth training necessary to conduct an FBA and complete a quality Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP).

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Introduction

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has provided the following description of a Function Behavior Assessment (FBA):

An FBA focuses on identifying the function or purpose behind a child's behavior. Typically, the process involves looking closely at a wide range of child-specific factors (e.g., social, affective, environmental). Knowing why a child misbehaves is directly helpful to the IEP Team in developing a BIP that will reduce or eliminate the misbehavior. (US Dept. of Education, 2009).

In summary, an FBA is defined as "…the process by which variables influencing problem behavior are identified" (Hanley, 2012). All behavior serves to meet four main needs or functions. These functions include sensory (or automatic), escape (or avoidance), attention (or social reinforcement), and tangible (or access to preferred items/activities). The purpose of an FBA is to illuminate which one of these functions continues to reinforce and bring about problem behavior. The conclusion of an FBA is a hypothesis statement that summarizes under what conditions the problem behavior occurs and which function it serves. Existing or new data is obtained to inform the conclusions or hypothesis statement throughout the assessment process. Once an FBA has been conducted, the results are utilized to develop a function-based *Behavior Intervention Plan* (BIP).

School districts are required to conduct FBAs, as well as implement a corresponding BIP, when students have been subjected to disciplinary actions and when their behavior has been determined to be a manifestation of the student's disability (*2018 Idaho Special Education Manual*, pg. 217). "Conduct as appropriate a functional behavior assessment (FBA) and provide behavioral intervention services and accommodations or adaptations designed to address the behavior violation so that it does not recur" (2018 Idaho Special Education Manual, pg. 217). School teams can choose, and it is best practice, to conduct FBAs and develop BIPs outside of the context of a manifestation determination. It is recommended that the school team consider and conduct an FBA and develop a BIP when a student's behavior interferes with their learning or that of others. In instances in which a student has an Individualized Education Program (IEP), the FBA and BIP are part of the IEP and implemented with the same degree of fidelity and progress monitoring.

When to Consider a Functional Behavior Assessment

Every educator has experienced disruptive classroom behavior; behavior that can disrupt instruction and require considerable attention, time, and energy from the educator. Not all instances of challenging, distracting, or vexing behavior in the classroom require an FBA. Common classroom management practices such as clear routines and expectations, praising appropriate behavior, providing corrective instruction and feedback, and emphasizing active student responding and high levels of academic engagement are highly effective ways of preventing and remedying disruptive classroom behavior. Visit Idaho SESTA's Classroom Management Behavior Series for more information and in-depth preventative strategies. Some student behavior may be more severe in nature and the strategies listed above may not be sufficient to eliminate it.

When the strategies outlined above fail to improve and remediate challenging behavior, the school team must consider a more in-depth analysis and intervention plan. The school team can utilize the Challenging Behavior Flow Chart to help guide the decision-making process and modifications to the environment, before considering an FBA (see appendix A). It is imperative the student's parent or guardian be included in this process; they are an integral and required team member throughout the FBA processes.

An FBA may be conducted whenever the school team identifies that it is necessary, and has the prior written consent of the student's parent or guardian. Often, this occurs when the team has determined that the behavior interferes with the learning of the student or others. Teams should also consider an FBA when behavior is harmful to the student or others or puts the student at significant social risk and challenges. Behavior that puts the student at significant social risks and challenges could be behavior that prevents the student from making and retaining social relationships or prevents them from being successful in the workplace. It is recommended that an FBA be completed prior to the development of any BIP. A student does not need to have an IEP or 504 plan in order to benefit from an FBA and BIP.

As a reminder, an FBA must be completed when the IEP team determines that a problem behavior is the manifestation of a disability and the student does not have a *Behavior Intervention Plan* (2018 Idaho Special Education Manual, pg. 217). An FBA is considered an assessment that requires the consent of parents/guardians, or the adult student prior to beginning the process (2018 Idaho Special Education Manual, pg. 7).

Why Conduct a Functional Behavior Assessment

An FBA identifies the function of a behavior, i.e., an unmet need or purpose for the behavior. It is conducted to identify the variables in the environment that bring about and maintain problem behavior (Steege & Watson, 2009). Regardless of function, problem behavior is often the result of a student lacking the skills necessary to navigate advocating for or meeting their own needs. By focusing on the function of behavior, the school team is empowered to develop an intervention plan that targets building and developing the missing skill deficits, as opposed to an intervention founded on punishment procedures (McIntosh et al., 2008). FBAs and their corresponding intervention plans are effective across grade levels for both students with and without disabilities (Goh & Bambara 2012). BIPs developed based on FBAs are more effective than those without (Ervin et al., 2001; Newcomer & Lewis, 2004).

Students will change their behavior when there are different, more reliable, effective, and efficient ways to get their needs met. This happens when students are taught more adaptable ways to gain or avoid sensory input, escape or avoid something perceived as undesired, gain their preferred mode of attention and social reinforcement, or access a preferred item or event. Identifying the function and motivation behind the student behavior is essential to decreasing the problem behavior and increasing student skills.

Conducting a Functional Behavior Assessment

An FBA should be viewed as a team problem-solving process. When the FBA and BIP are conducted and developed by a team, the plan is more likely to be carried out with fidelity. It is helpful if a team member has knowledge of applied behavior analysis (Gable et al., 2014). Although the FBA is conducted by a team, often there is a lead assessor. Written consent from the parent/adult student is required prior to beginning the FBA process.

The following will provide specific guidance around all sections of the FBA process and form.

Step 1. Identify Problem behavior

Once the team has utilized resources and strategies related to Classroom Behavior Management and the Challenging Behavior Flowchart and the team has

determined that student behavior warrants further assessment and intervention, the team will need to label and operationally define the problem behavior. We often give problem behavior behavioral labels such as “non-compliant”, “aggressive”, “self-injurious”, “disruptive”, “inappropriate”, “disrespectful,” and the list of examples could go on. While these labels give us a general idea of the problem behavior that is occurring, the label is not adequate to collect reliable and valid data or contribute to a valid assessment. Without reliable data, the validity of the assessment and the team’s ability to make data-based decisions are compromised (Cipani, 2018).

A behavior that has been operationally defined will be active, measurable, and observable. An **active behavior** is a behavior that a student performs. It is much easier to reliably collect data on the occurrence of a problem behavior, rather than the absence of a problem behavior. Collecting data on an active behavior increases accuracy since the data collector can more easily pinpoint and measure an instance of the behavior. Examples of non-active behavior could include non-compliance, disengagement, head down, and slumped on the floor/desk. These are behaviors that are not actively being performed; they are passive. In 1965, Ogden Lindsley introduced The Dead Man’s test. The intention was to provide a rule of thumb for deciding if something is a behavior and could be targeted for intervention. This test is important as focusing on what an individual actively does is essential to understanding and changing behavior.

The question posed by The Dead Man’s Test is: *Can a dead man perform the selected problem behavior?* If the answer is yes, the problem behavior does not pass The Dead Man’s Test and it is not ideal to target for assessment and intervention. If the answer is no, the problem behavior chosen to target is an active behavior and an appropriate target.

> *For example, suppose the target behavior is swearing. The team identifies the target behavior of "does not swear at peers." Does this pass the dead man's test? No. A dead man could refrain from swearing at peers. What would be better? How about "speaks to peers without swearing"? This passes The Dead Man’s Test because a dead man does not have the power to speak.*

Consider the behaviors of non-compliance or disengagement. Could a dead man be non-compliant or not follow a direction when given? Yes. Could a dead man be disengaged? Yes. In these instances, your team will want to consider more active alternatives to target. You could ask the team, “What does it look like when the student does not follow directions or is non-complaint?” “What are you observing or what do you see when they are disengaged?” An answer to the question “What does it look like

when the student is non-compliant" could be "the student rolls their eyes, engages in verbal refusal, reads a personal book, or doodles in their notebook when asked to perform an adult-delivered directive".

It is acceptable to select an inactive behavioral label in Step 1A of the FBA form. The team will simply want to ensure that they further refine that definition in active terms in Step 1B. For example, if the team selected the behavioral label of non-compliance in Step 1A, the operational definition in Step 1B may be "Non-Compliance is defined as: Verbally saying no and engaging in activities other than the adult delivered directive".

Measurable behaviors are behaviors that can be quantified. We may quantify a behavior in terms of how frequently the behavior happens, how long it continues (duration), or even the intensity at which it happens, such as decibel. See Idaho SESTA's Behavior Progress Monitoring Module for information regarding how to measure behavior.

Observable behaviors are behaviors that can be perceived through the senses. Often this is through the sense of sight. At times we may observe behaviors through other means such as what we can hear. Perhaps we did not see someone yell, but we could hear them yell. At times we may observe behavior through the sense of touch. We may not see someone poke us from behind, but we could feel it. Stay away from selecting mentalistic or unobservable behaviors such as dysregulated or depressed. These are internal states. While these states are very real and valid, they are difficult to observe and take data on. In an FBA, we consider and incorporate these internal states in our assessment when we evaluate setting events (Step 2C).

You can find more information on active, measurable, and observable behaviors by visiting the Behavior 101 Introduction Module.

Step 2: Data Collection and Synthesis

Step 2A. Sources of Data for Assessment

In Step 2, the lead assessor, in collaboration with the team, identifies a minimum of two sources for data. One source of data should always be direct data. Aside from completing a functional analysis, direct observation data is the most reliable and valid form of collecting data for an FBA. Direct observation data can be collected in the form of antecedent-behavior-consequence (ABC) data and by measuring the rate, duration, latency, or other qualities of the problem behavior. In

addition, direct observation data allows the team to document when, where, and what is happening when the problem behavior occurs. The team can learn more about collecting ABC data and forms that support the process by visiting the ABC Data Collection module and Module 2 of Behavior 101.

Indirect data collection is a process of gathering data through interviews, questionnaires, rating scales, and records reviews. This process is strengthened when multiple team members participate in data collection (Gable et al., 2014). The Functional Assessment Interview (FAI) or Open-Ended Functional Assessment Interview may be helpful interview tools to structure your interview methods.

Questionnaires and rating scales such as the Functional Analysis Screening Tool (FAST), Questions About Behavioral Function (QABF), Problem Behavior Questionnaire, and Motivation Assessment Scale (MAS) are also helpful tools for gathering indirect data for an FBA. These tools have limited reliability and validity, as compared with direct observation, and should be used sparingly or with caution. They can be helpful in developing an idea about why the behavior may be happening (function) but will provide the assessor with limited information regarding the context of the behavior and environmental variables that affect a behavior's occurrence or non-occurrence. Questionnaires and rating scales should not be used in isolation. When selecting to use questionnaires and rating scales, it is recommended that multiple scales be selected and utilized for a single problem behavior. For example, if the assessor has decided to utilize questionnaires and rating scales for a student with disruptive behavior, the lead assessor should ask each team member who has had experience with the behavior to fill out at least 2 questionnaires or rating scales, such as the *QABF* and *Problem Behavior Questionnaire*, both for the same disruptive behavior.

A team may encounter a student who engages in high-intensity, low-frequency behavior. This means the behavior is significant and interfering, warranting an FBA, but the behavior occurs so infrequently (a couple of times a year) that direct observation and data collection are difficult. Questionnaires and rating scales can be a good supplement to direct observation in these scenarios. Although questionnaires and rating scales have limited reliability and validity as compared to direct observation (Iwata et al., 2013; Palcowskyj et al., 2001, Zarcone et al., 1991,) they can still be a useful tool and provide insight into the assessment and intervention of problem behavior. An assessor may encounter the following scenarios to troubleshoot when utilizing questionnaires and rating scales:

1. The questionnaire/rating scale results suggest that the behavior has multiple functions.

a. This is ok. Sometimes behaviors can be maintained by more than one function. Typically, there will be one main function or a reason why the behavior occurs. Interviews can help illuminate this. If interviews/rating scales indicate multiple functions, consider selecting interventions for whichever function scored highest on the questionnaire/rating scales. Once the team helps the student develop the skills necessary to navigate the primary reason or function for their behavior, they can move on to developing the skills necessary to navigate the other functions. During the process of skill development, the student may generalize the skills taught and apply them across multiple functions to meet their needs. For example, a student is engaging in disruptive behavior to both escape/avoid work and to receive their preferred mode of attention/social reinforcement. The team teaches and increases the student's communication skills, enabling them to request help or a break. The student then generalizes these communication skills to help meet their need for social reinforcement/attention. The team observes an overall decrease in problem behavior.

2. Results for each team member who completes a questionnaire or rating scale indicate a different function for the behavior.
    a. This is also ok and may happen. It may not mean that the results are invalid, but could indicate that the student has learned that the problem behavior may function for one reason with one person, while it functions for another reason with another person. For example, the student may learn that their disruptive behavior is reinforced by a break from work with one teacher, while their disruptive behavior results in one-on-one attention and discussion about their behavior with another teacher. These results could be discussed in interviews and could lead to a discussion about what the behavior looks like and what happens immediately after the behavior across different adults in the environment.

3. One questionnaire/rating scale results in one function for the behavior while another questionnaire/rating scale results in a different function for the behavior.
    a. This sometimes happens when the team has not clearly and operationally defined exactly what the behavior looks like and/or what behavior they are responding to when completing the form. For example, a team member may know they are responding to a questionnaire or rating scale regarding disruptive behavior. If that behavior was not clearly and operationally defined, the team member may begin completing the form with the disruptive behavior of running around the classroom and making loud vocalizations in mind. However, they may shift in terms of what they are considering "disruptive behavior" and then begin completing the questionnaire/rating scale with regards to disruptive behavior that looks more like interruptions during class instruction. If the team

experiences these inconsistent results, they should consider revisiting their operational definition and further utilizing interviews and direct observation to develop their hypothesis.

Step 2B. Baseline Data

It is important that the team have a minimum of 3 to 6 baseline data points regarding the problem behavior. Establishing a pattern and trend to behavior during baseline is crucial to making data-based decisions regarding progress monitoring and implementation of the intervention plan. The team can report this data in form of narrative explanation and values or by inserting visual representation in the form of a graph. The only exception to minimum baseline data points would be in instances of high-intensity, low-frequency behavior.

Step 2C. Setting Events

Setting events are situations, states, or events that occur within the individual's environment but further away in time than the immediate antecedent. These events can set the stage for the problem behavior or even increase the probability of the problem behavior occurring. Common setting events include lack of sleep, feeling sick, feeling depressed or down in the dumps, or getting in a fight with your friend/family member. These are all events that could make it more likely a student would want to avoid work, gain extra attention, avoid loud environments or lights, or even gain preferred items or activities. Although these events might make a behavior more likely, they are not the immediate antecedent. The immediate antecedent is something that occurs immediately before the problem behavior.

For example, a student may have a work assignment delivered by the teacher and immediately verbally refuse, get up from the desk, and wander the room. The antecedent in this situation is the teacher delivering a work assignment. However, the setting event, which may make it more likely the student would want to escape or avoid work, could be that they are feeling depressed or had little to no sleep last night.

It is important to include parents and guardians in the FBA process. Parents have rich information related to setting events that school team members may not be privy to. If the school team is struggling to identify setting events or other ecological variables that could be affecting the problem behavior, they should consider the following list:

- Expectations of student by teacher/staff
- Nature of the teaching materials and/or learning activity

- Instructional style of staff
- Student's physical limitations or condition
- Physical comfort of environment, e.g., too noisy/crowded/cold/hot
- Environmental constraints
- Teacher/pupil ratio
- Time-out available
- Teacher absence
- Behavior of others, e.g., modeling, behavior directed toward student
- Recent changes in environment; sudden changes in activity/schedule
- Accessibility to reinforcement
- Environment provides more positive or negative interactions

Step 2D. Antecedent to Problem Behavior

In Step 2D, the team utilizes sources of data to identify the antecedents to problem behavior. Antecedents are any events in the environment that occur immediately prior to the problem behavior. Antecedents can often be referred to as the immediate trigger of the problem behavior.

> Take the example of the student who did not sleep well the night prior to school. When the teacher presented him with a work assignment they verbally refused and got up from their desk to wander the room. In this scenario, the antecedent is the teacher delivering a work assignment. This was the event that occurred immediately preceding the problem behavior and what triggered the problem behavior to occur. Remember, since it occurred further away in time from the problem behavior, but still affects the occurrence of the problem behavior, the student's lack of sleep the night before would be identified as a setting event.

In Step 2D(1), the team identifies the most commonly occurring antecedent. This information is obtained by collecting ABC data and is very helpful in identifying the function of the behavior. When reviewing ABC data, look for patterns regarding the problem behavior and antecedent and calculate the occurrence of a given antecedent for the problem behavior.

> For the example of the student who verbally says no and gets up from the desk to wander the room, the team may notice that most frequently that problem behavior is preceded by the teacher presenting him with a work assignment. This may occur in 75% of the instances of problem behavior recorded. This would be the most frequently occurring antecedent.

Step 2E. Consequences Following Problem Behavior

In Step 2E, the team identifies the consequences of the problem behavior. In the language of behavior science, consequences refer to any event that immediately follows the problem behavior. Often, consequences refer to something negative. "They need to know there are consequences for their actions." When we refer to consequences in behavior science, we are speaking of either positive or negative events that immediately follow the problem behavior.

> *For example, for the student who verbally refuses and wanders the room when a work assignment is delivered, the team may ask "what happens immediately after this?". Based on the collection of our ABC data or interviews, it is revealed that immediately following the problem behavior, the student is most often left to wander the room with occasional redirection from the teacher. After all, the teacher has a classroom of other students to support. This is the consequence of the problem behavior as it immediately follows the problem behavior. Although it is a consequence, from the student's perspective it may be positive, as they are not having to complete their assigned work.*

In Steps 2E(a-c), the team identifies the consequences of the problem behavior. This information will come from your ABC data or interviews. Of the identified consequences, the assessor will want to indicate the most commonly occurring consequence in Step 2E(1).

Step 2F. Antecedent to Desired Behavior

In Step 2F, the team identifies when the problem behavior is least likely to happen. Knowing what triggers the problem behavior is important for creating an intervention plan and teaching to skill deficits. However, knowing when the problem behavior is least likely to happen helps the team set the student up for success. This enables the team to design the environment in a manner that increases access to situations and supports that reduce problem behavior. The team can design the environment to mirror the settings and situations in which problem behavior is least likely to occur. Knowing when the problem behavior is least likely to occur can also illuminate the purpose of the behavior. For example, the team may discover that the behavior is least likely to occur during recess or lunch times when there are few academic demands and that the behavior is more likely to occur in the classroom.

Step 2G. Summary and Analysis

After collecting sufficient data, the team will analyze and summarize their findings. When analyzing the data, the team will be looking for patterns that predict when and under what circumstances the behavior is most likely and least likely to occur. In addition, the team will be looking for what reinforces or maintains the behavior and what the most likely function of the behavior is.

ABC data is often the most helpful form of data in the analysis step. In reviewing the antecedents and consequences, the team should have a picture of the context in which the behavior occurs most often. The team should be able to say "The problem behavior most frequently occurs under **these** conditions (most commonly occurring antecedent) and most often results in **these** (the most commonly occurring consequence) actions or events". The most commonly occurring consequence is likely what reinforces or maintains the problem behavior and can be used to identify the function.

Step 3. Hypothesis Statement (Summary Statement)

In Step 3, the team formulates a hypothesis statement about the function of the problem behavior. The statement directly relates to the data and outlines what the student gains, avoids, gets out of, or is otherwise communicating through the use of the problem behavior. The hypothesis statement will be automatically generated for the team, using the most commonly occurring antecedent, the problem behavior, the most commonly occurring consequence, and the most impactful setting event. If the team has reason to suspect or has identified multiple functions or explanations for the student's problem behavior, it is recommended that the team concentrate on the primary function (Alter et al., 2008). The primary function is the explanation or context in which the problem behavior most frequently occurs.

> For the student who engages in verbal refusal and wandering around the room, the hypothesis statement may look like "Given a work assignment, the student will verbally refuse and wander the class, which most frequently results in the teacher periodically redirecting the student while the student continues to wander the class. It is even more likely when the student did not sleep well the night before. This results in escape or avoidance of a perceived non-preferred task".

Step 4. Competing Behavior Pathway

In Step 4, the *Competing Behavior Pathway* will be utilized to organize the context in which the problem behavior occurs. This pathway will also be utilized in the behavior intervention planning process. The team will fill out the middle portion of the pathway based on their hypothesis statement. The middle unshaded boxes of the Competing Behavior Pathway will autofill with the information entered in earlier parts of the FBA. For our student engaging in verbal refusal and wandering the class, the Competing Behavior Pathway will look like this:

5. Desired Behavior	6. Consequence

3. Setting Event It is more likely when	2. Antecedent Given	1. Problem Behavior Will engage in	4. Reinforcing Consequence
Little sleep the night prior	Teacher delivered perceived non preferred work task	Disruption: Defined as verbal refusal an leaving desk to wander classroom	Occasional verbal redirection from teacher while wandering classroom and delaying completion of work assignment

7. Replacement Behavior	8. Reinforcing Consequence

Conclusion

In understanding the relationship between problem behavior and the environment, a school-based team is empowered to improve and change the lives of their students (Steege & Watson, 2009). Teams can employ evidence-based practices that support positive outcomes by conducting an FBA and developing a function-based BIP (Gable et al., 2014). If a team encounters questions, concerns, or struggles during the FBA process they may reach out for support and assistance from Idaho SESTA. Visit the Idaho SESTA Help Desk to submit your request.

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Appendix A

Helpful Links and Additional Information

Forms	Modules/Training Content
Guidance Document	FBA Module
ABC Data Collection Multiple Select	ABC Data Collection Module
ABC Data Collection Narrative	Challenging Behavior Flowchart Module
Challenging Behavior Flowchart	Thinking Functionally Module
FAST	Behavior 101
QABF	Behavior Progress Monitoring Module
MAS	
Problem Behavior Questionnaire	
FAI Structured Interview	
Open Ended Functional Assessment Interview	
Competing Behavior Pathway	
FBA Form	
BIP Form	
Crisis Planning Form	