

Parents' Guide to Functional Assessment

(3rd Edition)

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FIRST, THE BAD NEWS

How would you feel if you received a phone call from your child's school principal that begins with, "First, the bad news . . . ?" If your child is having trouble getting along at school, you may be wondering what the good news could possibly be. It might be that the school is planning to do a functional assessment, develop a positive behavior support plan, and work with you to locate resources to help your child get along better in school.

What Is Functional Behavioral Assessment?

Functional behavioral assessment is a process of identifying specific environmental factors that have an influence on when a particular behavior will occur. It is a type of assessment that can be used to plan positive ways to prevent or manage behavior problems at school (and at home – more about using it at home later). The assessment indicates, for an individual student, which situations encourage or discourage certain behaviors. We have all heard people say things like:

- "He is just showing off to get attention; ignore him."
- "The way she acts is really a cry for help."
- "He's trying to get out of doing his work."
- "Those other kids get her upset."

Although these sayings are trite, and may or may not fit your child's situation, common sense tells us that children's behavior often comes with clues to the child's needs and difficulties, if we take the time to look. A functional behavioral assessment does exactly that – looks for clues to find out what seems to set off the problem behavior, what keeps it going, when it is most likely to happen – and, most of all, what can be done to help the child get along better at school. A functional assessment really can be good news because it is often the first step to positive support, resources, and cooperative relationships with teachers and the school principal that are needed for success in school.

This booklet is a brief introduction to functional assessment and support for parents who may be able to use the information at home and who might work with school staff to complete and use a functional assessment at school. Functional assessments are

by nature variable because each individual child's situation will be unique in some ways. The model presented here is a general guide, not an exact prescription. The process usually begins when someone from the school sends home an informed consent about the functional assessment for the parent to sign. When a special education student is at risk for a change in placement or expulsion due to a serious discipline infraction or more than 10 suspensions, schools are required by federal law to conduct a functional behavioral assessment, if one has not been done already, within 10 days. After you read this booklet, we think you will agree that functional assessments should be used both at home and at school to prevent serious behavior problems rather than being postponed until a crisis forces the school to take action.

Functional Assessment at Home



Young children often enjoy learning how to make cookies and this pleasant experience may lead to more advanced cooking skills as the child gets older. It is easy to understand, to assess, why children will help make cookies. It is a social activity that is fun to do with others in the family and, if you don't burn them, the cookies taste good. As the child's cooking skill and sense of responsibility increases, cooking behavior might be motivated by wanting to please and surprise a busy working parent on her birthday, even

if getting an appreciative kiss from Mom is a bit embarrassing for a middle-school age child!



Let's use the example of cooking behavior to understand the four major elements studied in functional assessments:

1. Setting events are environmental factors that cause variations from typical behavior patterns. Here is an example: One family had taught a responsible older child, we'll call him "Joel," (not his real name) to help on days when Mom and Dad both had to work late, by fixing supper for the family. Joel would have a snack after school, do his homework, and then cook a planned meal that he knew how to fix. This usually went very well but two times it did not. Once, he felt sick and went right to bed as soon as he got home. The other time, Joel and his mother had a big argument in the morning and he just put peanut butter and jelly and bread on the table instead of cooking supper. Being sick and getting into a big argument were setting events that made cooking supper lose its usual appeal for Joel.

2. Antecedents are events or factors that signal, prompt, or remind us that this is the time and the place for a specific behavior. In Joel's case, the day of the week and the time of day usually indicated when cooking would start because the family had set up a schedule. He would do his homework while watching television and when the 5:00 news

came on, he knew it was time to start cooking. Being hungry might be an antecedent for cooking for some people, who have learned to tolerate waiting, but Joel was hungry when he came home from school and for him, that hunger prompted grabbing a quick, ready-to-eat snack, not cooking. He was not yet hungry again at 5:00 (although he would be by the time the food was cooked) so the antecedent for cooking was the planned signal, the 5:00 news.

3. Behavior like cooking is obviously something that is learned. Joel's parents had spent a lot of time as he was growing up in helping Joel learn to be a good cook and a safe cook. Unfortunately, less desirable behaviors also can be learned, and, as we will discuss in more detail later, adults do not always realize this is happening.

4. Consequences are the events that happen after the behavior and can be "good" or reinforcing – related to the behavior increasing, "bad" or aversive – related to a decrease in the behavior, "unimportant" or neutral – having no effect on the frequency of the behavior. We often think of consequences as something intended to be a punishment, as in the stern warning to someone who is misbehaving, "There will be consequences for that!" Actually, there are consequences of some sort for everything. For behaviors that occur over and over again, the important, or **maintaining** consequence, is the reason for or "function of" the behavior. For Joel's cooking, although clearly being able to eat what he cooked was rewarding, the real maintaining consequence was the social attention he received from his family, who were enthusiastic about his cooking and who were generous in their praise.

Joel's parents knew that if Joel was to continue to enjoy cooking, they needed to be aware of the importance of the four elements of functional assessments: (a) setting events, (b) antecedents, (c) behaviors that were learned, and (d) consequences. Just as we can understand why our sons and daughters learn to cook, want to cook, and why they do or do not cook when expected to on certain days, we can think about situations, events, social interactions, and other factors related to all kinds of behaviors, both problem behaviors and desired behaviors, such as:

- getting in the car to go to school or for a ride, with a smile,



- or starting an argument about putting on a seat belt.

What Do You Think?

1. What might be setting events, antecedents, or *maintaining* consequences for these different kinds of behaviors in the car?

Setting Events	Antecedents	Behaviors	Consequences
		Smile	
		Argue	



2. What do you think a *maintaining* consequence might be for leaving clothing on the floor?
3. What might be typical *maintaining* consequences for working hard to clean up a messy bedroom and then keeping it in order?

Setting Events	Antecedents	Behaviors	Consequences
		Toss clothes on the floor, leave things out	
		Hang up clothes, put things away, clean up the room	
		Keep it in order every day for a week	

4. Why would the answers to these questions often be different for different children?

5. How might friends and visiting relatives affect the child's behavior, both toward being neat and toward being messy?

The maintaining consequences that result in many behaviors being repeated over and over fall into two big categories (with innumerable variations):

The first category is **getting something** the child wants or enjoys, such as, food, a toy, or a favorite activity, like a game with Dad.



Although often clearly a pleasant consequence, this category can be tricky because sometimes problem behaviors are maintained by what is called “negative attention.” In this situation, adults or other children scold or complain about a child's problem behavior, intending to discourage it, yet the problem behavior keeps happening, and even gets worse. It may be that all the excitement or being the center of attention out weighs the criticism.

The second category is **getting out of something or getting away from something**, or someone, or some situation. We call this “escape” or “avoid” maintained behavior. In planning a way to change behavior that is maintained by escape or avoidance, we need to know precisely what it is about the situation that triggers this reaction.



It might be that the best way to improve the situation is to change whatever it is that is being avoided. What is frightening, aversive, difficult, or otherwise unpleasant? Is it necessary? Can it be changed? Or, can help be given?

If not, can a way of coping or managing the difficulty be taught? Although the possibilities are endless, a problem solving strategy that has helped many people is to first brainstorm a variety of possible solutions and then narrow down the list of options to try first to the most practical. In the next section, we will see how parents and school personnel can problem solve together.

Thinking Systematically: Step by Step

Functional assessment involves a systematic problem solving process that can be used at

home or at school. Sometimes the process is simple and quickly leads to a solution. Other times, the process is more involved and it takes longer to find answers. If it seems likely that a simple functional assessment would be successful, that is the place to start. Here is a true example of a simple, functional assessment process that led to positive, successful, function-based support. A young child in elementary school, we'll call him "Calyn" (not his real name), was acting out quite a bit in class. Specifically, he disrupted lessons by speaking out of turn, name calling, and throwing things (pencils, erasers, shoes) in the classroom. His experienced teacher had a classroom management system that involved the following consequences for misbehavior: warnings, contacting parents, and office discipline referrals that led to detentions and suspensions. These consequences were not functioning like punishments in terms of their effect on Calyn's misbehavior because it was getting worse – more frequent and more disruptive -- instead of being reduced or eliminated. These are the steps the teacher and the parents took to assess the function of the problem behavior and to develop function-based support:

1. Interview: The teacher and Calyn's parents went over a series of questions selected from a book that has become a classic in the field of functional assessment by Rob O'Neill and associates (1997)^a. These questions are designed to clearly define the behavior of concern and to gather information about setting events, antecedents, behaviors, and consequences. The teacher had already looked over the questions and wanted to find out if the parents' answers to the questions would be similar to hers. In addition, the teacher hoped that the parents would be able to suggest some possible setting events because the teacher thought there probably were some setting events but she did not have any information on them. They also talked about Calyn's academic standing (average) and discipline records (unacceptable!), his physical health (good), strengths (sense of humor), and times when Calyn behaved well (recess, art). Calyn's father told the teacher that if she would just have Calyn sit in the front of the room instead of in the back, he would behave.

2. Observations: After the interview, Calyn's teacher moved him to the front of the room and she also observed him more closely than usual for a few days, especially since he was clowning around and showing off so much when sitting in front of the class that she was

^aO'Neill, R. E., Horner, R. H., Albin, R. W., Sprague, J. R., Storey, K., & Newton, J. S. (1997). *Functional assessment and program development for problem behavior: A practical handbook*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

determined to move him to the back of the room again. The teacher asked his parents to come for another meeting to talk about a different plan.

3. Hypothesis: The teacher had a hypothesis about why Calyn was acting out: When Calyn's classmates are doing their school work and paying attention to their lessons, he will call out, use name calling, and throw things in order to make them look at him and, sometimes, to laugh or argue, or throw something back at him.

4. Brainstorming: The adults used *Competing Behaviors Pathways* diagrams (see O'Neill et al., 1997, or visit the Web pages listed in the back for examples) as a basis for brainstorming ideas for making positive changes. They listed a variety of ideas for changing every aspect of the situation, and, according to the rules for brainstorming, they did not criticize each other's ideas because sometimes a silly idea leads to a great idea.

5. Developing the Behavior Support Plan: After the brainstorming session, Calyn's teacher and parents selected the ideas they thought would be most effective yet still practical. A key aspect of the plan was for Calyn to learn acceptable ways to get attention from his classmates. The teacher asked the parents if they had anything at home that Calyn's peers would think was "really cool!" and that would be something that he could earn the right to bring to school to talk about as an "expert." They did! The family had a pet parrot that could talk and dance! A contract was developed saying that Calyn could earn points by staying on task at school without disrupting the class, one point for each school day in which he received no more than one warning and no office discipline referrals. When he had 20 points, he could bring his pet to school and tell the class all about the pet.

6. Monitoring the Intervention: The teacher set up a simple system for recording the points that Calyn earned and explained it to Calyn and to another teacher who also would be involved part of the time. It took Calyn 25 school days to earn 20 points.

7. Evaluating the Outcome: Although Calyn's behavior slipped on 5 of the next 25 school days, and he still needed one warning on many of the other days, overall, the improvement was dramatic and very welcome. Even more important, his peers did think that his pet was "very cool" and they seemed to think Calyn was cool now too. The best part of the intervention was that Calyn's relationships with his classmates continued to improve even after the intervention was over. That is, he seemed to have more friends and in turn to be less in need of acting out to be the class clown. It was like a turning point. He had learned how to get along

during those 25 days of “training” and had gained some status by being able to give an interesting talk about parrots.

When simple functional assessments and support plans are not enough, the teacher and the parents should seek help from others. The school has access to resources from the state department of education where they have specialists in behavior issues who can help inform the school on ways to help the child. School districts and communities have access to more resources than the local school alone does. A guide to accessing community resources, titled “Finding Help,” is available on the “Positive Behavior Support at School” web site -- <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~ttobin> -- where this booklet, and more information, can be found. If you are looking for information to assist a child with a disability, check the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities: www.nichcy.org. For more information on positive behavior support, particularly as it applies to schools, go to the Center for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS): <http://www.pbis.org>. Another resource is the Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights, which seeks to expand opportunities and enhance the quality of life of children and young adults with disabilities and their families, based on the concept of parents helping parents: <http://www.pacer.org/>

Recommended Reading

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