



Maryland State Department of
EDUCATION

Division of Special Education/Early Intervention Services

Functional Behavioral Assessment & Intervention Planning

**Technical
Assistance
Bulletin**

7

JULY 2002

1. What is functional behavioral assessment (FBA) and why is it important?

Functional behavioral assessment is the process of gathering information that reliably predicts the conditions and/or circumstances surrounding a student's behavior that is considered inappropriate. Before personnel are able to redirect instructional interventions and supports or teach an appropriate replacement behavior, the targeted behavior must be identified across settings and described in accurate, objective, observable terms. This assessment is a collaborative, student-centered, problem-solving process.

A functional behavioral assessment is an assessment of a student's behavior to determine its function. All behaviors serve a function for individuals. We behave to get something, avoid something, or control activities. When students exhibit behaviors considered problematic, a behavioral assessment is needed to accurately describe and ascertain how the behavior functions for the students. For an appropriate replacement behavior or strategy for the identified problem behavior to be successful, the replacement behavior must satisfy the same function for the student.

2. How is an FBA different than behavioral analysis?

A functional behavioral assessment (FBA) and behavior analysis are on different ends of the same continuum. A functional behavioral assessment is the collection of data that is needed to accurately describe a problem behavior within the settings it occurs to determine its function. Functional is a descriptor used for the factors identified as influencing or controlling the behavior. Much of the material on FBA and behavior intervention plans (BIP) comes from the field of applied behavior analysis. Behavioral analysis is a more experimental approach that involves observing and recording a student's responses to planned behavioral interventions over time. Some problem behaviors may be so severe, pervasive, and intense that behavioral analysis may be warranted.

In either approach, in order to extinguish an inappropriate behavior and replace that behavior with an appropriate behavior that serves the same function, an assessment of that behavior is necessary. Such an assessment should be designed to:

- Determine the functional antecedents of a targeted behavior;
- Describe the behavior in precise and objective terms; and
- Determine the functional consequences of the behavior for the student.

3. Does conducting an FBA result in a diagnosis, eligibility, or placement determination?

No. An FBA alone is insufficient for determining the presence of a disability, eligibility for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) or determining a student's educational needs and placement. Although an FBA cannot be used in isolation for making these decisions, it is important for the IEP team to review existing data. An Individualized Education Program (IEP) team may determine additional data is needed to ensure it has sufficient relevant functional information on a student's social and behavioral performance in order to develop and/or revise the student's IEP to ensure all of the student's needs have been addressed. This includes all needs, whether or not they are commonly linked to a particular category of disability.

4. What are the functions of behavior?

Identifying the functions of a behavior for a student provides individuals with direct explanations of how a particular behavior "works" for an individual student in a given context. Behaviors serve a function to:

- Get something (positive reinforcement), such as social attention, sensory stimulation, peer status and peer attention, and tangible rewards;
- Escape or avoid something (negative reinforcement), such as an event or person. This function typically results in a behavior that enables the student to terminate or postpone an event. As examples, students may tantrum, display physical or verbal aggression; or
- Engage in other activities to control antecedent stimuli such as instructional activities.

The functions of behavior may be different depending upon the context in which the behavior occurs. Also, multiple behaviors may serve similar functions or different functions in different contexts. As humans we do not engage in isolated behaviors or display single behaviors, but rather a string of behaviors that are connected to the ongoing interactions we have with others.

5. When must an FBA be conducted?

For students with disabilities, under the IDEA, a functional behavioral assessment is required once the student's behavior has resulted in a removal or series of removals equivalent to 10 school days. However, it is recommended that the FBA process be applied to any student's behaviors wherever those behaviors are of concern. The purpose of an FBA is to improve our understanding of behavior and the context in which it is observed, and to use this information to guide the development of behavior support plans. Whenever a problem behavior is first observed, the FBA process is used to enable professionals to develop a behavioral support plan. As such, an FBA should be conducted whenever a student's behavior is difficult to understand and/or a student's behavioral support plan needs to be developed or improved.

6. Who conducts the FBA?

The IDEA and COMAR do not specify a particular professional discipline or group of school personnel as the individuals to conduct the FBA. However, all staff members in a school should understand the purpose of conducting an FBA, be familiar with the basic steps of the process, and be able to participate in the FBA process. Therefore, all staff members should receive instruction on the purpose and features of FBA, and have opportunities to observe or participate in the FBA process. Personnel should receive training to be technically fluent with the FBA process and have the capacity to accurately and efficiently conduct an FBA.

7. What steps are involved in conducting an FBA?

There are a variety of formats and instruments public agency personnel may use to conduct an FBA. An FBA should include the following three steps:

- **Step 1: Collect Information**

The collection of data is needed to:

- Identify the specific problem behavior; and
- Define that behavior in specific and objective terms.

This is accomplished through indirect observations and direct observations. Indirect observations, such as informal conversations, questionnaires, checklists, and structured interviews with key persons who have contact and experiences with the individual student and can offer insights into the contexts or conditions under which the behavior occurs. Direct observations are the most reliable and valid procedures for collecting information because observers watch the behaviors as they are occurring and note the environmental events (environmental factors,

antecedent, and consequence events) that are associated with the behaviors. The collection of data should include specific information regarding the environment, events, and activities immediately prior to the behavior, as well as following the behavior.

- **Step 2: Propose a hypothesis of the student's behavior**

The hypothesis should explain the relationship between a specific behavior and general conditions that appear to predict and maintain that behavior. The hypothesis focuses on the relationship between an observable and measurable antecedent, the behavior, and consequence variables. Most importantly, the statement indicates the possible function of that behavior for the student. A complete hypothesis includes:

- An objective description of the behavior;
- Possible setting events and antecedents that trigger the behavior; and
- Possible consequences that maintain the behavior.

- **Step 3: Assess the validity of the hypothesis**

This is to collect additional information about the conditions under which the problem behavior occurs and does not occur, and demonstrate that occurrences of the behavior and the presence of these conditions are related and predictable. Typically this entails systematic observations of a student to identify and confirm patterns of predictable behaviors in order to create an effective intervention plan for changing the behavior. If during the validation phase the hypothesis cannot be confirmed, the hypothesis would need to be reformulated and revalidated.

8. How are the outcomes of an FBA used and what is the relationship between an FBA and a behavioral intervention plan (BIP)?

In determining appropriate strategies for the student, the results of the FBA are used to develop and implement a behavior intervention plan (BIP). This plan must also consider the student's strengths and the concerns of the student's parents. The BIP should focus on positive supports and strategies to address the events, environmental factors, and/or actions that trigger the behavior, to teach the student a replacement behavior or skill that serves the same functional intent for the student and how to implement the BIP consistently across settings.

9. What are positive behavioral interventions and supports and what does IDEA say about positive interventions?

The purpose of positive interventions is to teach the student appropriate replacement behaviors that serve the same function for the student. Interventions and supports should focus on proactive preventative natural supports for the student. Intervening and altering the known environment, activities, and our responses to the behavior by modeling and positively reinforcing the desired appropriate behavior within the setting is more efficient and effective for both the student and the staff. The IDEA requires a student's IEP team to consider positive behavior interventions, strategies, and supports to address the behavior when that behavior impedes the student's learning or the learning of others. The identified interventions shall be included in the student's IEP as appropriate. IDEA also specifically requires the involvement of the student's general education teacher in the development, review, and revision of the student's IEP to assist in determining appropriate positive interventions and strategies for the student.

10. Who should be involved in the behavioral intervention planning and implementation for a student?

The planning and implementation of effective interventions and supports requires a collaborative problem-solving team approach. The team must share in problem identification and development of an action plan that includes mutual responsibility for implementation, evaluation, modification, and accountability for outcomes. The membership of this collaborative team will vary based on the school and student needs. Input from the student's parents and general education teachers is important. The general educator needs to share with all team members the behavioral expectations of the school and classroom as well as provide suggestions as to how the classroom environment and general education curriculum can be modified to support the student.

11. What is included in a BIP?

A BIP for a student should be based upon the FBA that addressed the student's behavior and at a minimum should include:

- An objective, specific description of the behavior;
- Specific hypotheses as to why the behavior occurs; and
- Interventions to be employed to address the behavior.

To teach a student appropriate replacement behaviors, the BIP needs to draw upon known student strengths and positive reinforcers that are important to the student. The focus of the BIP should not be correction of the inappropriate behavior. Rather, it should focus on how to plan for and provide the student with opportunities to replace the behavior by learning new behaviors across environments. This may include how to modify the context in which the behavior has been known to occur so events associated with the behavior are removed or changed. The student should be provided opportunities for planned practice and modeling the replacement behavior. The BIP should include how individuals are to give the student positive recognition of an appropriate replacement behavior that focuses on the behavioral function for the student. The chosen interventions also need to specify how all persons are expected to implement the strategies consistently across environments, document the implementation and response, and how frequently the team is to review the results.

12. When should a program of individualized positive behavioral strategies and interventions be implemented?

It is recommended that an assessment of a student's behavior and the development of a plan for behavioral interventions to address a student's behavior should be initiated wherever a student's behavior is of concern. School personnel are encouraged to intercede on behaviors of concern as early as possible. The purpose of a BIP is to improve our understanding of behavior and the context in which it is observed and guide personnel in the consistent implementation of appropriate replacement and natural supports.

For students with disabilities under the IDEA, at a minimum, a student's IEP must include positive behavioral interventions whenever the IEP team determines that a student's behavior is interfering with the student's learning and/or the learning of others. An FBA and BIP is required when the student's behavior has resulted in a removal or series of removals that are equivalent to 10 school days.

For more information, call 410-767-0858

MARYLAND STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Nancy S. Grasmick, State Superintendent of Schools
Carol Ann Baglin, Assistant State Superintendent,
Division of Special Education/Early Intervention Services
200 West Baltimore Street
Baltimore, MD 21201