

❖ Functional Assessment of Behavior ❖

Reference

A functional assessment is the primary tool in behavioral support. It is not a medical diagnosis enabling a match with a prepackaged clinical intervention. The purpose of the functional assessment is to gather information to redesign an environment that "works" for people with communication and behavioral challenges. It involves the collaborative participation of the person with the challenges and those who know the person best, with the support of a person trained in behavioral analysis.

Functional assessment procedures address the behavioral support needs of people who exhibit the full range of problem behaviors, such as self-injury, hitting and biting, violent and aggressive attacks, property destruction, and disruptive behaviors (e.g., screaming or tantrums). Those who exhibit problem behaviors may be labeled as developmentally disabled, autistic, mentally retarded, mentally ill, emotional or behavior disordered, traumatic brain injury or may carry no formal diagnostic labels at all. These individuals vary greatly in terms of their overall support needs and ability to communicate and participate in their own behavioral support. Information about when, where, and why problems behaviors occur is valuable in building effective and efficient behavior support. Interventions done without a plan can make behaviors worse. Another reason to do one is that it is now an expected practice and a professional standard. Many states have laws or regulations stipulating the need for a functional assessment before significant behavioral interventions.

A functional assessment contains:

- A clear description of the problems behaviors, including behaviors that occur together
- Identification of the events, times, and situations that predict when the problem behaviors will and *will not* occur across the full range of typical daily routines
- Identification of the consequences that maintain the problem behaviors (what the person "gets out" of the behaviors, e.g., attention, escape, preferred items or relationships)
- Development of one or more summary statements or hypotheses that describe specific behaviors, specific types of situations in which they occur, and the outcomes or reinforcers that maintain them in that situation
- Collection of direct observation data that supports developed summary statements

A functional assessment can be done in many ways and at different precision levels depending on the severity of the behavior. Anyone who has ever used an A-B-C (Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence) chart has conducted one form of a functional assessment. A person who has observed undesirable behavior in different situations and concluded that "she does that because..." or "he does that in order to..." has also developed a summary statement about the variable influencing behavior. When assessment information allows confident prediction of the conditions in which the problem behavior is likely to occur or not occur and when there is agreement about the consequences that perpetuate the problem behavior, then the functional assessment is probably complete. Specific methods for collecting functional assessment information fall into three general strategies:

Information gathering. Talk to the individual and/or to those who know the individual best. Use interviews, questionnaires, and rating scales to identify which of the range of events in an environment are linked to the specific problem behavior. Questions to answer include: What problem behaviors cause concern? What events or physical conditions occur significantly earlier in time before the behavior that increase predictability as to when the behavior will

occur? What consequence appears to maintain the problem behavior? What appropriate behaviors could produce the same consequence that appear to maintain the problem behavior? What can we learn from previous behavior support efforts about strategies that are ineffective, partially effective, or effective for only a short time?

Direct observation. Observe the person in natural conditions over an extended time period. These observations are usually done by teachers, direct support staff, and or family members who already work or live with the person. The observations must be done in a manner that does not interfere with normal daily environments or require extensive training. In most cases, the observer records when a problem behavior occurs, what happened just before the behavior, what happened after, and their perception as to the function of the behavior. When an observer collects 10-15 instances of the behavior, he or she can discover where a pattern exists.

Functional analysis manipulations. Systematically manipulate potential controlling variables (consequences or structural variables such as task difficulty or length) in laboratory or natural conditions to observe effects on a person's behavior. These analyses involve creating situations that will reduce/eliminate or provoke the problem behavior to test whether the hypothesis is correct. The most precise, but also the most expensive (in time and energy) method of conducting a functional assessment, functional analysis may be the only way, in some cases, to ensure an adequate assessment. It is the only approach that allows unambiguous demonstration of a functional relationship between environmental events and problem behaviors.

To support the functional assessment, consider assessing activity patterns (the variety and degree of community integration and relationships using instruments such as the *Resident Lifestyle Inventory* or *Social Network Analysis Form*) and medical and physical issues. Too often, behavioral interventions have been used to address behaviors that have a medical etiology. Allergies, infections, menstrual cycle effects, toothaches, chronic constipation and other medical conditions may exacerbate the occurrence of challenging behaviors. The effects and side effects of medication also influence behavior.

Behavioral support must be conducted with the dignity of the person as a primary concern.

The objective of functional assessment is not just to define and eliminate undesirable behavior but also to understand the structure and function of behavior to teach and promote effective alternatives.

Functional assessment is a process for looking at relationship between behavior and the environment; it is not simply a "review" of the person with problem behaviors.

For more information on positive behavioral support, call the Family Connection at 1-800-854-4938 and ask for our free fact sheets, a listing of related articles, or answers to questions.

This is a product of The Family Connection. The Family Connection, under the directorship of Rob Homer (University of Oregon), the Research and Training Center (RRTC) on Positive Behavioral Support, conducts research on the causes of challenging behaviors and strategies for support. Working with the RRTC is the University of Oregon, California State University, State University of New York at Stony Brook, University of South Florida, University of California at Santa Barbara, and the University Affiliated Program and the Beach Center on Families and Disability at the University of Kansas. The Beach Center (3111 Haworth, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045, 913-864-7600) takes the researchers' work and gets it to families in as many ways as possible. As adapted with permission from O'Neil, R. E., Homer, R.H., Albin, R. W., Sprague, J. R., Storey, K., & Newton, N. S. (1997). *Functional assessment and program development for problem behavior: A practical handbook*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brookes/Cole.