Why conduct a functional behavioral assessment (FBA)?

Behavior is often a child's way of communicating needs that he or she is not able to verbally express. A functional behavioral assessment, also known as an FBA, can determine the reasons why a student's behavior is affecting his or her education. Different students can display behaviors that look similar, such as throwing a book, but the reason for or the cause of the behavior may be very different for each. Identifying what the student "is trying to escape or avoid" or whether they are "getting something from a behavior" can help the IEP team identify what would be helpful when developing a positive behavior intervention plan. The behavior plan may have the goal of replacing the problem behavior with a different behavior, teaching new skills that the child may not have that result in the problem behavior, or to teach appropriate and desired behavior skills.

How is a problem behavior identified?

It's important to be objective when observing the child. Observation should be done in multiple settings, both structured settings (classroom) and unstructured settings (playground, lunch, and physical education). It is best practice to include the IEP team in the process of identifying problem behaviors. The IEP team needs details of what the problem behaviors look like, what specifically the child is doing, and what needs to be considered with developing the positive behavior intervention plan.

Before the IEP team develops the positive behavior invention plan, they should consider the information contained in the child's current IEP. The current IEP will help identify the child's known needs. The details listed in the accommodations/modifications section of the IEP will clarify what the child needs to function in the different environments. It is also helpful to consider things such as if the child does best when on a schedule and if they need frequent reminding of the rules.

Finding out the reason that the problem behavior is occurring can lead to a behavioral plan that is successful. Interviews with the student, members of the IEP and others who interact with the student can be helpful in determining what the causes of the behavior. The interviews should be structured to obtain information about the student's behavior. Sample questions to ask IEP team members and others who interact with the student may include:

- In what settings do you observe the behavior?
- Are there any settings where the behavior does not occur?
- Who is present when the behavior occurs?
- What activities or interactions take place just prior to the behavior?
- What usually happens immediately after the behavior?
- Can you think of a more acceptable behavior that might replace this behavior?

The following questions may help determine if the problem behavior is tied to a skill the student has not learned.

- Does the student understand the behavioral expectations for the situation?
- Does the student realize that he or she is engaging in unacceptable behavior, or has that behavior simply become a "habit"?
- Is it within the student's power to control the behavior, or does he or she need support?
- Does the student have the skills necessary to perform expected, new behaviors?

The following questions may help determine that the student has the needed skills to change his or her behavior but, for some reason, not the desire.

- Is it possible that the student is uncertain about the appropriateness of the behavior (e.g., it is appropriate to clap loudly and yell during sporting events, however, these behaviors are often inappropriate when playing academic games in the classroom)?
- Does the student find any value in engaging in appropriate behavior?
- Is the behavior problem associated with certain social or environmental conditions?
- Is the student attempting to avoid a "low-interest" or demanding task?
- What current rules, routines, or expectations does the student consider irrelevant?

Interviews with the student may be useful in identifying how he or she perceived the situation and what caused her or him to react or act in the way they did. Examples of questions include:

- What were you thinking just before you threw the textbook?
- How did the assignment make you feel?
- Can you tell me how Mr. Smith expects you to contribute to class lectures?
- When you have a "temper tantrum" in class, what usually happens afterward?

Direct assessment involves observing and recording situations and settings where the behavior has occurred. An ABC chart can be used in this situation. (A=Antecedent or what happened before the behavior occurred, B=Behavior, and C=Consequence or what happened because the behavior occurred)

Once the team agrees that enough data has been taken, this information is reviewed to determine if a pattern has been created. If patterns cannot be determined, the team can review and revise, as appropriate, the functional behavioral assessment plan to identify other possible methods for assessing behavior.

If a pattern has been established or the team feels they have enough information a hypothesis (assumption) is then established on why the behaviors occur. This hypothesis addresses the things

that are most and least likely to cause the problem behavior to happen. The hypothesis also predicts the changes and consequences that will likely serve to maintain the desired behavior.

Developing a behavior plan

The behavior plan that the IEP team develops should contain positive strategies, program or curriculum modifications, and supplementary aids or supports required to address the problem behavior(s) as well as emphasizing skills the student needs to learn more appropriate behavior(s). A timeline should also be developed for implementing the plan and for future reassessment.

IEP teams may want to consider the following techniques when designing behavior intervention plans and supports:

- The past history of the behavior and/or consequences that have been previously used;
- Teaching more acceptable replacement behaviors that serve the same function as the inappropriate behavior;
- Implementing changes in curriculum and instructional strategies; and • Modifying the physical environment.

Providing supports

Sometimes supports are necessary to help students learn to use appropriate behavior. The student, for example, may benefit from working with school personnel, such as counselors or school psychologists. Other people who may provide sources of support include:
- Peers, who may provide academic or behavioral support through modeling or practicing conflict-resolution activities and meeting the student's need for attention in appropriate ways;
- Families, who may provide support through setting up a homework center in the home and developing a homework schedule, which enables the child to appropriately participate in follow-up class discussions;
- Teachers and paraprofessionals, who may provide both academic supports and curricular modifications to address and decrease a student's need to avoid academically challenging situations; and
- Language pathologists (speech therapist) who can help increase a child's expressive and receptive language skills. This can provide the child with other ways to respond to a situation.

Other options for positive behavioral interventions can include:
- Replacing problem behaviors with appropriate behaviors that serve the same (or similar) function as inappropriate ones;
- Increasing rates of existing appropriate behaviors;
- Making changes to the environment that eliminate the possibility of engaging in inappropriate behavior; and
- Providing the supports necessary for the child to use the appropriate behaviors.

Care should be given to select a behavior that likely will be caused by and reinforced in the natural environment, for example, using appropriate problem-solving skills on the playground will help the student stay out of the principal's office.

Knowing if the behavior plan is working

It is good practice for the team to come together to evaluate whether the behavior plan is working. The purpose of this evaluation is to ensure student success. Reasons for the team to get together can be the following:

- The child has reached his or her behavioral goals and objectives, and new goals and objectives need to be established;
- There has been a situational change and the behavioral interventions no longer address the current needs of the student;
- The IEP team makes a change in placement; and
- The original behavior intervention plan is not bringing about positive changes in the student's behavior.

Adapted from LD online Addressing Student Problem Behavior http://www.ldonline.org/article/6180/