

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning



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Using Functional Communication Training to Replace Challenging Behavior

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SERIES

WHAT WORKS BRIEFS

Using Functional Communication Training to Replace Challenging Behavior

This *What Works Brief* is part of a continuing series of short, easy-to-read, “how to” information packets on a variety of evidence-based practices, strategies, and intervention procedures. The Briefs are designed to help teachers, and other caregivers support young children’s social and emotional development. In-service

providers and others who conduct staff development activities should find them especially useful in sharing information with professionals and parents. The Briefs include examples and vignettes that illustrate how practical strategies might be used in a variety of early childhood settings and home environments.

Mark’s Story

Mark, a 3-year-old boy, is bright and energetic. He enjoys participating in activities that involve numbers and letters; reading picture books; and playing with blocks, cars, and trucks. Mark’s communication skills, however, have been slow to develop. After many attempts to encourage him to speak more in class, Mark’s teacher, Ms. Blake, and his peers have nearly given up. An additional concern has been an increase in episodes of disruptive behavior. When Mark doesn’t get a toy that he wants or when he is asked to share a toy with others, he tends to scream, cry, tantrum, or bite other children. When these behaviors happen, Mark’s peers get upset and run away from him, and Ms. Blake takes away his toy. This outcome often makes Mark’s tantrums worse. However, Ms. Blake has noticed that when Mark gets the toy that he wants or is allowed to play alone, he does not exhibit these kinds of behaviors. Ms. Blake has also noticed that Mark’s tantrums occur at times when he is asked to do something that is hard for him.

of doing, (2) can be taught very easily, (3) will be easily noticed and acknowledged whenever the child uses it, and (4) works quickly for the child. The replacement behavior can involve speech, gestures, signs, or pictures, as long as it is something readily available and appropriate to the child’s developmental level. For example, replacement behaviors might include having the child communicate messages such as “I’m hungry,” “I’m tired and want to take a break,” “May I play with that toy?” “No, thank you,” or “Please help me.” The child can communicate these messages through a variety of means such as using words or signs or pointing to pictures.

Ms. Blake and Mark’s parents were very concerned about Mark’s behavior at school. They discussed the problem at length. Ms. Blake said, “We’ll need to conduct a functional behavioral assessment to learn the function of Mark’s behavior. In other words, we will be trying to figure out what Mark is trying to tell us.” She continued by saying, “I’ll gather some information, observe Mark at different times of the day, and ask you some questions. Then we can use that information to better understand why Mark is having so much difficulty playing with his friends.” Mark’s father agreed that it would be a good idea and added, “We really need to know exactly why Mark is doing this.”

What Is Functional Communication Training?

Functional Communication Training (FCT) is a strategy for use with children who require a more individualized intervention approach because they continue to exhibit challenging behaviors even when classroom-wide prevention strategies are in place (for example, classroom rules, consistent schedules, predictable routines). FCT involves identifying the function or purpose of the child’s challenging behavior (for example, hitting, screaming, taking toys away from others) and then teaching an appropriate behavior that will serve the same purpose for the child. This behavior is referred to as a replacement behavior. For example, adults might teach a child who hits his peers when he needs or wants something to instead use his words to ask his friends for help. While the challenging behavior is often disruptive or aggressive, such as a tantrum, the replacement behavior should involve speech or some other type of appropriate communication, such as pointing or gesturing.

How Does This Intervention Work?

FCT requires that a functional behavioral assessment be conducted (see *What Works Brief #9* on Functional Behavioral Assessment) to identify the function of the child’s challenging behavior (for example, getting attention or escaping from an activity). After the function or purpose of the challenging behavior is identified, the next step is to determine a more desirable or acceptable form of communication for the child to use as a replacement for the challenging behavior. This replacement behavior, or new form of communication, should be something that (1) the child is capable

Once a replacement behavior is selected, FCT involves ignoring the challenging behavior and prompting and acknowledging the use of the replacement behavior. When using FCT, it is important to remember several things:

- ✓ Take advantage of natural opportunities to encourage and acknowledge the replacement behavior (for example, pay close attention to Mark, and prompt him to ask for help when the behavior is triggered, rather than waiting until Mark begins to hit to then prompt the new behavior).
- ✓ Make certain that all of the child’s new communicative requests are honored. Especially early on, it is vital that Mark is given assistance each time he requests it. For FCT to be effective, the new skill should work better for the child than the old challenging behavior. If the challenging behavior works better (for example, Mark gets what he wants more efficiently by hitting), the child is more likely to revert to using the challenging behavior rather than the replacement behavior. However, if the new replacement behavior works more efficiently, then the child is more likely to use this new skill.
- ✓ Be persistent with the intervention. Initially, the child might use the challenging behavior more often. It is important to continue to be consistent until the child understands that the new skill will be useful in obtaining what he wants.

An important principle of FCT is that the replacement behavior be at least as effective as the challenging behavior in terms of the child getting what the child wants. Therefore, the replacement behavior should be obvious and regularly rewarded by staff, parents, or other caregivers.

After several observations, Ms. Blake found that when Mark was required to share a preferred toy he was unable to communicate his frustration. Instead, Mark communicated his frustration through tantrums and biting. Ms. Blake also found that Mark's tantrums were more severe when he was not given a prompt or advance warning that he would need to share a toy or play with something different. Ms. Blake and Mark's parents then met to discuss his strengths and communication skills. They agreed that Mark's verbal communication was slow in developing so, at first, an efficient form of communication should probably involve something visual, such as a cue card, to support his speech. Although everybody wanted to encourage Mark's speech, they decided to take advantage of his interests in the alphabet and early reading. Therefore, the initial replacement skill would be cue cards that Mark could hold up to indicate his requests for assistance in obtaining a toy or completing a difficult activity. At the same time, Mark would be encouraged to use his speech for the same purpose.

What Resources Are Needed to Use FCT?

Although some situations may vary, few or no additional resources are needed to use FCT. The important things are to identify what the challenging behavior looks like, identify the purpose of the challenging behavior, recognize the child's strengths and weaknesses, and make certain that staff (and/or family) time is available to implement FCT consistently in the early stages. In some cases, following this strategy may require additional staff time for a short period.

Based on the functional assessment, Ms. Blake and Mark's parents decided to use Functional Communication Training (FCT) to help Mark. They began the intervention during playtime, when Mark was having the most difficulty. Because Mark tended to exhibit challenging behavior most frequently when he was unable to play with a favorite toy or when asked to share toys with peers, Ms. Blake showed Mark how to use the cue cards during playtime. Ms. Blake paid close attention to Mark during the first few sessions. Mark was given cue cards that said "I need help," and "I want a new toy." Mark's peers and all of the adults in the classroom were informed about what the cards meant. When Mark held up a card, he was asked what he wanted, and the request was honored. If Mark started to fuss, Ms. Blake stepped in and prompted Mark to use his card. At the same time, she urged Mark to use speech to make the same request (although she did not insist on the request being spoken). The goal was to teach Mark that using the cards to communicate was easier and worked more efficiently than exhibiting a challenging behavior.

Who Are the Children That Benefit from This Intervention?

Much of the research on FCT has been conducted with children who have disabilities. The procedure works most effectively when a functional behavioral assessment has been conducted, when the function of the challenging behavior is clearly described, and when a noticeable and natural communicative behavior (for example, pointing, asking verbally) is identified as a replacement

to challenging behavior. As always, when implementing any strategy, teachers must take care to make necessary adaptations to meet the individual, ethnic, and cultural differences of the children in their care.

What Behavioral Changes Can Be Expected?

Changes in the amount of challenging behavior can be expected in a fairly short time, although the complete replacement of the challenging behavior with a more desirable or acceptable behavior may take weeks or longer. This time frame will depend on the efficiency with which the replacement can be taught, the consistency with which FCT is implemented, and the length of time that the child has engaged in the challenging behavior.

What Can Adults Do?

If a child is consistently exhibiting challenging behavior, there are some important things you can do.

- ✓ First, conduct a functional behavioral assessment (see *What Works Brief #9*). Not only is it important to define what challenging behaviors look like, but it is also important to try to understand the function or purpose of the behavior. Step back and look for patterns in the child's behavior by asking the following questions: What was the child doing before exhibiting challenging behavior? What happened after? What did the child get or avoid from exhibiting challenging behavior? These types of questions will help identify the purpose of the behavior.
- ✓ Second, identify the child's skills, especially communication skills. During what activities is the child most successful? How does the child communicate what he needs or wants? Is the child able to use words to communicate, or is he more likely to point to things or make gestures?
- ✓ Next, take time to identify the persons, activities, or objects that are most reinforcing or rewarding to the child. These can be incorporated into FCT interventions so that the child will be motivated to participate and learn new skills.
- ✓ Finally, take some time to consider the child's developmental level and progress. What types of communicative behaviors or skills are age appropriate? How do the child's skills match with what is considered age appropriate? Ask these types of questions: How does the child communicate with others? Does she understand more than she is able to communicate? Does she use words or gestures to get attention? Take notes whenever the child communicates in a socially appropriate or age-appropriate manner. These skills can be built upon when using FCT.

After a week of practice, Ms. Blake saw that Mark was getting better at leaving preferred toys and activities and being able to communicate with his peers by using the cue cards. Ms. Blake was not only pleased with Mark's comments but also with how the other children accepted Mark. They had begun to include him in their playtime activities, which appeared to make Mark very happy. Although it took more time for Mark to respond without having a tantrum, Mark learned to share with his peers—he stopped having tantrums and biting his peers and instead used the cue cards and some speech to communicate. Mark had learned a new and more functional skill, and his peers soon stopped avoiding him. Building on this progress, Ms. Blake continued to use FCT and Mark's preferences to encourage him to use speech more frequently and for more complex purposes.



We welcome your feedback on this What Works Brief. Please go to the CSEFEL Web site (<http://csefel.uiuc.edu>) or call us at (217) 333-4123 to offer suggestions.

Where Do I Find Information on Implementing This Practice?

See the CSEFEL Web site (<http://csefel.uiuc.edu>) for additional resources.

The procedures involved in FCT are described best in books such as those by Carr and colleagues (1994) and Durand (1990) listed below.

Carr, E. G., Levin, L., McConnachie, G., Carlson, J. I., Kemp, D. C., & Smith, C. E. (1994). *Communication-based intervention for problem behavior: A user's guide for producing positive change*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Durand, V. M. (1990). *Severe behavior problems: A functional communication training approach*. New York: Guilford Press.

Neilsen, S. L., Olive, M. L., Donovan, A., & McEvoy, M. (1998). Challenging behaviors in your classroom? Don't react, teach instead. *Young Exceptional Children*, 2(1), 2-10.

Practical information also can be found on the following Web sites:

National Network for Child Care. Children without Friends, Part 3: Learning about Children's Strengths and Weaknesses
http://www.nncc.org/Guidance/dc32_wo_friends3.html

OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports
<http://www.pbis.org/>

Beach Center on Families and Disability. (1998). How to: Encourage Desirable Behavior in People with Developmental Disabilities (Available online via OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports)
http://www.pbis.org/english/How_to_Encourage_Desirable_Behavior.htm

Reinforcement Unlimited: What Is a Functional Communication Training?
<http://www.behavior-consultant.com/discuss-fct.htm>

What Is the Scientific Basis for This Practice?

Many studies have documented the effectiveness of FCT. The following list includes some of the research.

Derby, K. M., Wacker, D. P., Berg, W., DeRaad, A., Ulrich, S., Asmus, J., Harding, J., Prouty, A., Laffey, P., & Stoner, E. A. (1997). The long-term effects of functional communication training in home settings. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 30(3), 507-531.

Dunlap, G., & Fox, L. (1999). A demonstration of behavioral support for young children with autism. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 1(2), 77-87.

Durand, V. M. (1990). *Severe behavior problems: A functional communication training approach*. New York: Guilford Press.

Durand, V. M., & Carr, E. G. (1992). An analysis of maintenance following functional communication training. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 25(4), 777-794.

Reeve, C. E., & Carr, E. G. (2000). Prevention of severe behavior problems in children with developmental disorders. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 2(3), 144-160.

Wacker, D. P., Peck, S., Derby, K. M., Berg, W., & Harding, J. (1996). Developing long-term reciprocal interactions between parents and their young children with problematic behavior. In L. K. Koegel, R. L. Koegel, & G. Dunlap (Eds.), *Positive behavioral support: Including people with difficult behavior in the community* (pp. 51-80). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

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WHAT WORKS BRIEFS

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HANDOUT

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Defining Functional Communication Training (FCT)

- ✓ FCT is based on an understanding of the purpose of the challenging behavior.
- ✓ FCT teaches socially appropriate behaviors that children can use in place of challenging behavior.
- ✓ FCT strengthens a child's communication skills and at the same time reduces his or her challenging behavior.



Selecting the Replacement Behavior

- ✓ Once the function or purpose of the child's behavior is determined (see *What Works Brief #9*), a new communication skill that serves the same purpose as the challenging behavior is selected. This new skill is called the replacement behavior.
- ✓ The replacement behavior, or new form of communication, should be something that (1) the child is already capable of using, (2) can be taught very easily, (3) will be easily noticed and responded to positively whenever the child uses it, and (4) works quickly for the child.
- ✓ The replacement behavior can involve speech, gestures, signs, or pictures, as long as the strategy is something readily available and appropriate to the child's developmental level and is realistic to implement.



Implementing Functional Communication Training

- ✓ Once the new communication form is selected, the intervention involves ignoring the old (challenging) behavior and prompting and acknowledging the use of the newly selected replacement behavior.
- ✓ The newly taught replacement behavior should be as effective or more effective than the challenging behavior in terms of the child getting what the child wants.
- ✓ FCT provides more opportunities for the child to be acknowledged for socially appropriate behavior than for challenging behavior.
- ✓ FCT is most effective when the child is given access to persons, objects, or activities that he or she prefers as a result of using his or her new communication skills. When the child is given desired and meaningful feedback, he or she is more likely to learn and perform the socially appropriate replacement behavior.