

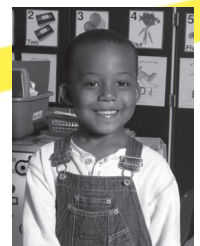
Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning



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What Are Children Trying to Tell Us? : Assessing the Function of Their Behavior

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SERIES

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What Are Children Trying to Tell Us?: Assessing the Function of Their 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, parents, and other

caregivers support young children’s social and emotional development. They include examples and vignettes that illustrate how practical strategies might be used in a variety of early childhood settings and home environments.

“I feel really sad about it, but I think Derek will have to find a different program,” said Ms. Morden, an experienced preschool teacher in a large metropolitan city. “I don’t know how to reach Derek. His behavior is so unpredictable. I can’t have children coming to school and being afraid that they will be hit by Derek,” she told her classroom assistant, Ms. Eacott. Ms. Morden simply did not understand why Derek was so aggressive. Both Ms. Morden and Ms. Eacott had observed Derek hitting and kicking other children on numerous occasions. The problem had become so severe that his peers had begun to avoid him altogether. The time had come to do something for Derek, but what?

What Is Functional Behavioral Assessment?

Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) is used to understand the purpose or function of a specific problem behavior exhibited by a child. FBA is a process for developing an understanding of a child’s problem behavior, and, in particular, how the behavior is influenced by environmental events. FBA should be considered when the behavior is thought to inhibit a child’s performance and participation in daily activities and routines. FBA identifies the environmental factors or events that consistently predict or result from a child’s problem behavior. Once the purpose or function of the problem behavior is understood, support teams can design and use effective interventions that promote success and participation of the child in daily activities and routines. FBA is an essential component of the process of positive behavior support (see *What Works Brief* #10 on positive behavior support).

“Time to change centers,” said Ms. Morden when the timer went off. Most of the children began to leave their centers and rotate to a new station. Derek stayed in the block area as four children arrived there to play. Ms. Morden redirected him, “Derek, it’s time to go to art center.” “No, I don’t want to!” said Derek, who turned and kicked Amanda in the leg, causing her to cry. “Derek! That’s not OK; kicking hurts,” said Ms. Morden. “You’ve hurt your friend. You have a timeout.” Ms. Eacott took Derek to the other side of the room, where he sat in the timeout chair for four minutes. Once again, Derek had hurt another child. “This is the umpteenth time this week he’s done that. I’ve got to do something about this,” said Ms. Morden. “Sooner or later, someone is really going to get hurt!”

How Does FBA Work?

FBA can be conducted individually or by a team (e.g., parent, teacher, behavior resource person). The process involves collecting information through the use of observation, interviews, and record reviews (e.g., school records, medical records, diagnostic reports). If done as a team, different members of the team might assume different roles (e.g., observing, interviewing, reviewing reports and records). The information gathered is used to understand what happens before the problem behavior, what the problem behavior looks like, and what happens after the problem behavior.

Interviews are used to collect information about the problem behavior from teachers or family members who are very familiar with the child. Interview questions are used to gain information about: (1) the nature of the behavior (e.g., what the child does, how frequently), (2) events that may predict the behavior, (3) what the child may gain or avoid through problem behavior, (4) how well problem behavior works for the child, and (5) what circumstances are not associated with the behavior. Interviews are helpful in the functional assessment process because they allow you to gather information about the child in multiple settings and from the perspectives of multiple people. Observations are used with the interviews to provide evidence or data on the factors that predict and maintain problem behavior. A popular and easy method for conducting observations is to watch the child and write down the events that immediately precede an occurrence of problem behavior, describe the problem behavior using concrete terms, and write down the events that follow the problem behavior. This information can be written on index cards and collected for later analysis.

Once all the information (interviews, observations, and record review) is collected, the information is analyzed by the team or the individual. This approach is used to determine the purpose of the problem behavior—whether it occurs in order for the child to obtain something (e.g., attention, an object, an activity) or to escape something (e.g., difficult demands). The FBA process is complete when there is enough information that will lead to a hypothesis or summary statement describing the function or purpose of the problem behavior. The hypothesis statement will lead directly to interventions designed to prevent problem behavior and to teach the child new skills that will replace problem behavior (see *What Works Briefs* #10 on positive behavior support and #11 on functional communication training).

After attending a workshop on FBA and talking with a few colleagues, Ms. Morden contacted Derek's grandmother to share her concerns. Derek's grandmother was in full support of finding new ways to help Derek with his behavior. Ms. Morden, Ms. Eacott, and Derek's grandmother met to discuss the challenges associated with Derek and to talk about the concept of FBA. The team agreed that conducting a FBA would be helpful. Ms. Morden, Ms. Eacott, and Derek's grandmother used observation cards to gather information about the events surrounding Derek's problem behavior. The teachers kept track of each time Derek hit or kicked one of his peers, the activity and time of day in which it occurred, the children he was playing with, what happened immediately before the behavior, and what happened after the behavior. Derek's grandmother also provided several observation cards about problem behavior that Derek had at home. Additionally, Ms. Morden conducted interviews with both Ms. Eacott and Derek's grandmother to gain their insights about Derek's challenging behaviors.

After two weeks of collecting information, the team met to discuss Derek's behavior. Ms. Morden began the discussion by asking the team to share their perceptions after focusing on Derek these past few weeks. Ms. Eacott responded, "I noticed that Derek appeared to have the most difficulty during the learning centers and circle time. Every day that he was asked to go to the art center, he hit or kicked one of his peers, and he was given a timeout. However, when he spent time in the block center, Derek's behavior was better. In fact, he wasn't aggressive at all." Ms. Morden nodded in agreement. "That's right, Derek loves building with blocks. But he sure doesn't like to do writing or coloring. I try to get him to color or write his name when the other children are doing their homework, and he starts crying and tears up the paper," said his grandmother. Derek's grandmother also shared, "If I give him something else to do that he likes, he can sit with the other children; he just won't work on writing his name or coloring like the rest of them." "That brings me to another idea," said Ms. Morden. "In the interviews, both of you noted that Derek likes to make choices, and the observation cards show that he is less aggressive in activities where he has a lot of choices, like blocks or dramatic play. Derek is much better when he gets to pick the toy or the activity. My observation cards also show that a lot of problem behavior happens in circle time where Derek has to follow the rules of the group. It seems like he is having problem behavior in circle time so that he can leave and go to timeout."

Based on the functional assessment information, the team agreed that Derek hit or kicked other children in order to escape from difficult tasks or those he doesn't like, particularly the art center and circle time. They also agreed that Derek was least aggressive during block center and in activities where he had opportunities to make choices such as dramatic play, sensory table, and computer. With those ideas in mind, the team decided that they should try to give Derek more help in the art center and during circle time and give him more opportunities to make choices. To make circle

time more interesting, Ms. Morden decided to provide Derek with choices of where to sit, allow him to select the song or story, and to provide more manipulatives within the activities. She also decided to ask Derek if he wanted to leave circle if he became distracted. She decided it would be better to let him leave circle on her terms, rather than after he had caused a disruption. She also restructured the art center so that there were obvious choices of activities (e.g., draw, easel paint, or paste) and made sure that an adult helped Derek get started. She also provided magic markers in the art center as a choice for Derek because he seemed to have problems using crayons or pencils.

Who Are the Children Who Have Participated in Research on FBA?

FBA has been used effectively with individuals from age 2 to adulthood. Researchers have successfully completed FBAs with children and families from a wide variety of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as children who are from at-risk environments, have behavior disorders, or have developmental delays. Researchers have also studied the effects of FBA in a wide variety of settings including Head Start, special education classrooms, early education programs, family homes, and the community.

A month later, Derek's grandmother visited the classroom. "Derek's doing so much better!" said Ms. Eacott. "Now that Ms. Morden and I have helped Derek with circle time and art, he's a different person. He hasn't hit anyone in two weeks!" "I think the choices have helped too," said Ms. Morden. "Now that Derek has more opportunities to pick which activities to do, he seems like a happier boy. I'm also realizing that sometimes we were asking Derek to do things that were too difficult for him. I'm going to provide him with a little more one-to-one attention and see if we can help him with some of his learning problems." Derek's grandmother asked about his participation in circle time because she was worried that he would not be ready for kindergarten if he could not sit with the group. Ms. Morden reported, "On most days, Derek sits for circle the entire time, he knows that he can ask to leave, but usually he doesn't want to. Frankly, I think circle time is more interesting for all the children now that we have made the changes for Derek."

What Changes Might Occur as a Result of FBA?

FBA alone does not change a child's behavior. However, once a FBA is used to identify the purpose or function of the child's problem behavior, interventions can be selected that are based on the child's needs. Interventions that are "assessment-based" or follow the FBA have resulted in significant and rapid changes in children's problem behavior, as well as the development of age-appropriate and socially appropriate behaviors taught in replacement.



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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.

Practical information on FBA can be found in journals, including the following: *Young Children*, *Teaching Exceptional Children*, *Young Exceptional Children*, and *Young Exceptional Children Monograph Series: Practical Ideas for Addressing Challenging Behaviors*.

See the following Web sites and articles for examples on how to implement aspects of FBA:

OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) <http://www.pbis.org>

Online Academy (Sponsored by the University of Kansas and the Office of Special Education Programs) <http://onlineacademy.org>

Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Positive Behavior Support <http://rrtcpbs.fmhi.usf.edu>

Janney, R., & Snell, M. E. (2000). *Teachers' guides to inclusive practices: Behavioral support*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes. (Available at <http://www.brookespublishing.com>.)

Kaiser, B., & Rasminsky, J. S. (1999). *Meeting the challenge: Effective strategies for challenging behaviours in early childhood environments*. Ottawa, Canada: Canadian Child Care Federation. (Available through NAEYC; see <http://www.naeyc.org>.)

O'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.

Tobin, T. J., & von Ravensberg, H. (2001). *Parent's guide to functional assessment and support*. Eugene, OR: Educational and Community Supports, University of Oregon. (Available for free at <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~ttobin>.)



What Is the Scientific Basis for This Practice?

For those wishing to learn more about the topic, the following resources provide additional information:

Blair, K. C., Umbreit, J., & Bos, C. S. (1999). Using functional assessment and children's preferences to improve the behavior of young children with behavioral disorders. *Behavioral Disorders*, 24(2), 151-166.

Dooley, P., Wilczenski, F. L., & Torem, C. (2001). Using an activity schedule to smooth school transitions. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 3(1), 57-61.

Harding, J., Wacker, D. P., Cooper, L. J., Asmus, J., Jensen-Kovalan, P., & Grisolano, L. A. (1999). Combining descriptive and experimental analyses of young children with behavior problems in preschool settings. *Behavior Modification*, 23(2), 316-333.

Kamps, D. M., Ellis, C., Mancina, C., Wyble, J., & Greene, L. (1995). Case studies using functional analysis for young children with behavior risks. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 18(3), 243-260.

Kern, L., Ringdahl, J. E., Hilt, A., & Sterling-Turner, H. E. (2001). Linking self-management procedures to functional analysis results. *Behavioral Disorders*, 26(3), 214-226.

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HANDOUT

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Functional Behavioral Assessment is important because:

- ✓ It provides a clear description of problem behaviors.
- ✓ It identifies variables that predict the occurrence of a problem behavior.
- ✓ It helps identify the purpose of the child's problem behavior.
- ✓ It helps identify and expand the child's strengths.
- ✓ It helps identify interventions that match the identified purpose of the problem behavior.
- ✓ It helps parents and teachers “step back”—by removing themselves from the situation, teachers and parents are better able to objectively observe the child's behavior.
- ✓ Interventions developed using FBA have resulted in meaningful reductions in problem behavior.
- ✓ Interventions developed using FBA can result in higher rates of engagement and can promote positive social interactions.



Remember:

- ✓ The more clearly a behavior is defined, the easier it is to study and understand.
- ✓ It may be important to consider events that occurred earlier in the child's day as well as those that occurred immediately before the problem behavior. Events such as breakfast, the bus ride to school, and the amount of sleep a child had can influence behavior.
- ✓ Behavior depends on the context—the reason a child engages in a problem behavior in one setting may be different in another.
- ✓ One way to better understand why problem behavior occurs is to identify features of the child's environment that are present (e.g., people, activities, and objects) when the problem behavior does not occur.
- ✓ Always consider the child's strengths. The more the child's strengths are identified and incorporated into interventions, the greater likelihood of success.
- ✓ FBA is based on the idea that children engage in problem behavior because “it works” for them. The key is to identify the purpose of the behavior and then design interventions that support children in getting their needs met by using appropriate and socially acceptable behavior.