

From Recent Conferences: Functional Behavior Assessment

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IDEA 2004 provides the right to a functional behavior assessment (FBA) when problem behaviors cause a student to be removed from their current educational placement. Section 1415(k) of the law says these students shall “receive ... a functional behavioral assessment, behavior intervention services and modifications, that are designed to address the behavior violation so that it does not recur.” The IEP team can also decide to conduct an FBA in hopes of avoiding a need to change placements.

The purpose of an FBA is to determine the student’s underlying motivation for their behavior – how it functions to get them something they want. Despite the legal requirement and the fact that FBAs become important at such critical times, parents and educators often do not know enough about them. So two recent conference presentations were welcome. In November, POAC-NoVA hosted the nation’s leading expert on problem behaviors, Dr. Brian Iwata. A full day of Dr. Iwata’s two-day conference stressed the importance of accurate behavior assessment techniques.

Functional assessment can be done three ways: indirect methods, descriptive analysis and experimental analysis. Indirect methods usually consist of giving a structured interview to people who have observed the problem behavior. The questions are designed to gather information that will suggest the function – is the student seeking to gain attention, to avoid demanding situations, etc? Iwata pointed out the most commonly used tools, including the Durand Motivational Assessment Scale, were published in research studies, but the reliability of the tools were not assessed. So Iwata subjected every question of his own tool, the Functional Analysis Screening Tool, to rigorous validation. After several revisions of the tool, two observers of the same incident produced the same result only 67% of the time. Iwata’s opinion of this result: “It’s just terrible.”

In descriptive analysis, information is recorded describing behavior as it happens. It usually takes the form of A-B-C data, where what happened before (the antecedent), during (the behavior) and as a result of the problem behavior (the consequence) are charted. Patterns in this information suggest the function of the behavior. But Iwata notes that many problem behaviors cannot safely be ignored. So the consequence will usually be some kind of attention, which biases A-B-C data to suggesting this function.

The limits of descriptive analysis were powerfully demonstrated by Dr. Dorothea Lerman at this year’s Maryland Association for Behavior Analysis (MABA) conference. She reported a study where classroom teachers and behavior analysis experts took A-B-C data on video segments of simulated classrooms. Only 50% of the teachers identified the targeted function. Only 60% of the experts were correct as well.

Since the most commonly used assessment methods are unlikely to be accurate, experimental analysis is the alternative. In this method, test conditions are set up that are intended to provide attention or restrict it, to apply demands or withhold them. By controlling the antecedents and the consequences intentionally, rates of the problem behavior in each condition can be monitored to see when the behavior actually increases. This method is extremely accurate. But because it requires carefully arranged environments and a lot of 1:1 time (several sessions each for multiple conditions over a series of days) it may be difficult to implement in schools. Iwata noted that a promising alternative, called trial-based assessment, will be published soon that gets similarly



accurate results with a series of 2 minute trials interspersed throughout a typical classroom day.

While only experimental analysis is true functional behavior analysis, other FBA methods at least produce more educated guesses. Both Iwata and Lerman agree that as much consistent, structured information as the team can gather as part of a student's FBA, the better the result can be. To be prepared, parents and teachers should learn all we can about FBA methods before problem behaviors arise. You don't need to wait until the next conference. Beth Glasberg's Functional Behavior Assessment for People with Autism: Making Sense of Seemingly Senseless Behavior ('Topics in Autism' series, 2005) provides a clear and helpful introduction that is also a quick read.

