

## Functional Assessment of the Causes of Problem Behavior

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### Functional Behavioral Assessment involves asking...

- ▣ What are the antecedents of the problem behavior (SDs in operant conditioning or the eliciting stimuli in classical conditioning)? and
- ▣ What are the immediate consequences of the behavior (i.e. positive or negative reinforcers)?

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### Specific questions asked in a functional assessment of the causes of problem behavior include:

- ▣ Is the behavior being controlled or elicited by particular stimuli?
- ▣ What is reinforcing the behavior?
- ▣ Does the behavior lead to escape from aversive events?
- ▣ What function does the behavior serve from the client's point of view?

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**Approaches to functional assessment:**

- ❑ Use questionnaires to discover antecedents and consequences of problem behavior
- ❑ Carefully observe and describe antecedents and consequences
- ❑ Experimental functional analysis – for example, if it is not known whether a behavior is reinforced by attention, allows an individual to escape from unpleasant situations, or is self-reinforcing, use a *multi-element* or *alternating treatment* design.

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***Functional assessment***

- ❑ approaches for attempting to identify antecedents and consequences of behavior

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***Functional analysis***

- ❑ experimental testing of hypotheses concerning the causes of behavior

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***Problems with experimental functional analysis:***

- ❑ Frequencies of problem behaviors are sometimes too small, and therefore functional analysis will require a lot of time to gather sufficient data.
- ❑ They cannot be applied to extremely dangerous behaviors.
- ❑ They often require expense and manpower to carry out effectively.

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***Causes of Problem Behaviors: Problem behaviors maintained by attention from others (social positive reinforcement)***

- ❑ Does attention reliably follow the behavior?
- ❑ Does the child look to or approach a care giver / teacher just before engaging in the behavior?
- ❑ Does the individual smile just before engaging in the behavior?
- ❑ Problem behaviors of this sort often involve tantrums, pestering and excessive attention seeking.

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***Causes of Problem Behaviors: Problem behaviors maintained by attention from others (social positive reinforcement)***

- ❑ Treatments include selective ignoring, using DRO or DRI schedules, or bringing the behavior under appropriate stimulus control, i.e. causing it to occur when it is more appropriate

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***Causes of Problem Behaviors: Problem behaviors maintained by self-stimulation (internal sensory positive reinforcement).***

- ❑ Such behaviors are often found in the developmentally disabled, and include: stereotypic behaviors, rocking, hand-flapping, and self-injurious behaviors.
- ❑ Treatments involve enriching the child's environment so as to reduce his sensory deprivation, altering the sensory consequences (e.g. wearing gloves to prevent self-scratching), and using extinction.

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***Causes of Problem Behaviors: Problem behaviors maintained by environmental consequences (external sensory positive reinforcement) i.e. the nonsocial external environment.***

- ❑ This could include a child throwing toys just for the reinforcing value of seeing things fly across the room or hearing the crash, playing in / overflowing sinks / toilets, etc.
- ❑ Treatment involves sensory reinforcement of a more desirable alternative behavior.

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***Causes of Problem Behaviors: Problem behaviors maintained by escape from demands (social negative reinforcement).***

- ❑ This could include tantrums when an adult makes requests of him (thus allowing him to get out of the request), or other noncompliant behaviors.
- ❑ Treatment could include minimizing the aversiveness, i.e. making sure that requests / demands are within the child's capability, and gradually increasing the difficulty of requests or otherwise teaching the child an acceptable means of indicating that he finds a task aversive.

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***Causes of Problem Behaviors:*** Elicited problem behaviors (respondents).

- Indicators that a problem behavior is elicited are that the behavior occurs in a certain situation or in the presence of certain stimuli and that is never followed by any clearly identifiable reinforcing consequences and that the behavior seems to be involuntary. For example, aggression could be elicited by an aversive stimulus or withholding of a reinforcer. Fear behavior can be elicited by anxiety-provoking stimuli.
- Treatment would involve counter-conditioning techniques.

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***Causes of Problem Behaviors:*** Medical causes of problem behavior.

- *Behavioral diagnostics* involves a broader behavioral assessment than functional behavioral assessment which would include looking into things such as menstrual cycles, eating / elimination cycles, medications, health conditions, etc. If health issues seem to be a factor, a physician should be consulted prior to introducing behavioral treatment.

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Rationale for Using Functional Behavioral Assessments to Develop Positive Behavior Interventions

- When a student's behavior disrupts classroom instruction, teachers often address the problem by manipulating events that follow the misbehavior (e.g., verbal reprimands, isolation, detention, suspension).
- Experience has shown that this approach fails to teach the student acceptable *replacement behaviors* (i.e., behaviors that are expected under certain circumstances).

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Rationale for Using Functional Behavioral Assessments to Develop Positive Behavior Interventions

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- Recently, educators have begun to introduce various programs designed to teach students more acceptable ways to behave. The area of social skills development has been especially popular. However, decisions regarding which behaviors to teach a student are largely subjective and often unrelated to the cause of the problem behavior.

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Rationale for Using Functional Behavioral Assessments to Develop Positive Behavior Interventions

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- What has been absent is a method for determining "why" the student misbehaved in the first place.

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Rationale for Using Functional Behavioral Assessments to Develop Positive Behavior Interventions

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- The success of classroom behavior interventions hinges on identifying the likely causes and purposes of problem behavior and finding ways to teach and promote appropriate replacement behaviors that serve the same "functions" as the inappropriate behaviors.
- Inappropriate student behavior may have the same form but serve different functions for different students.

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Functional Assessment is a Team Effort

- Often done as part of an Individual Education Program Team (IEPT)
- Administrative participation in the school is essential

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A Method for Conducting a Functional Assessment:  
Describe and Verify the Seriousness of the Problem

- IEP teams usually will work with the referring classroom teacher to define, in concrete terms, the exact behavior of concern
- Conduct initial observations of both the student of concern and 1-2 classmates selected at random. By observing other classmates, the team will be able to determine the seriousness of the problem and the discrepancy between present behavior and what is considered to be an acceptable level of behavior

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A Method for Conducting a Functional Assessment:  
Describe and Verify the Seriousness of the Problem

- Initial observations may indicate that many students have similar discipline problems and that the solution may actually rest in changes in classroom practices.
- Also take into consideration teacher expectations for student academic performance as well as classroom conduct. It might be that teacher expectations for the student exceed or fall below the student's ability to perform.

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A Method for Conducting a Functional Assessment:  
Describe and Verify the Seriousness of the Problem

- Consider whether a particular response may relate to cultural differences or expectations. For example, in some cultures, making eye contact with adults is considered rude; in others, peer competition is discouraged.

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One way for the IEP team to judge the significance of the behavior exhibited by the student of concern is to pose the following questions:

- Does the student's behavior significantly differ from that of his/her classmates?
- Does the student's behavior lessen the possibility of successful learning for the student and others?
- Have past efforts to address the student's behavior using standard interventions been unsuccessful?

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One way for the IEP team to judge the significance of the behavior exhibited by the student of concern is to pose the following questions:

- Does the student's behavior represent a behavioral deficit or excess, rather than a cultural difference?
- Is the student's behavior serious, persistent, chronic, or a threat to the safety of the student or others?
- If the behavior persists, is some disciplinary action likely to result?

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Refine the Definition of the Problem Behavior

- Define the behavior in a way that it is not vague and is easy to observe
- May be necessary to observe in more than one setting
- Group multiple problem behaviors of a similar nature together when developing the behavior plan

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Gather information on...

- ▣ times when the behavior does/does not occur (e.g., just prior to lunch, during a particular subject or activity);
- ▣ location of the behavior (e.g., classroom, playground);

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Gather information on...

- ▣ conditions when the behavior does/does not occur (e.g., when working in small groups, structured or unstructured time);
- ▣ individuals present when the problem behavior is most/least likely to occur (e.g., when there is a substitute teacher or with certain other students);

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Gather information on...

- ▣ events or conditions that typically occur before the behavior (e.g., assignment to a particular reading group);
- ▣ events or conditions that typically occur after the behavior (e.g., student is sent out of the room);

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Gather information on...

- ▣ common setting events (e.g., during bad weather); and
- ▣ other behaviors that are associated with the problem behavior (e.g., a series of negative peer interactions).

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Collect Information on Possible Functions of the Problem Behavior

- ▣ Categorize behaviors by function: separating actions which "get something" that is positively reinforcing for the student (e.g., peer attention or adult approval) from behavior intended to "avoid (or escape) something" that is aversive to the student (e.g., academic assignments that are too demanding, interactions with specific peers).

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Collect Information on Possible Functions of the Problem Behavior

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- ❑ distinguish between behaviors that stem from a *skill deficit* (lacking ability to perform a behavior) versus those that result from a *performance deficit* (able to engage in behavior but fails to do so).

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Direct and Indirect Measures of Student Behavior

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- ❑ Direct Assessment
- ❑ Scatterplot
- ❑ A B Ccharts
- ❑ Functional Interviews

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Determine what aspect of behavior to measure

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- ❑ Frequency
- ❑ Duration
- ❑ Severity

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*Severity of Disruptive Behavior Rating Rubric*

- ❑ Behavior is confined only to the observed student. May include such behaviors as: refusal to follow directions, scowling, crossing arms, pouting, or muttering under his/her breath.
- ❑ Behavior disrupts others in the student's immediate area. May include: slamming textbook closed, dropping book on the floor, name calling, or using inappropriate language.
- ❑ Behavior disrupts everyone in the class. May include: throwing objects, yelling, open defiance of teacher directions, or leaving the classroom.

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*Severity of Disruptive Behavior Rating Rubric*

- ❑ Behavior disrupts other classrooms or common areas of the school. May include: throwing objects, yelling, open defiance of school personnel's directions, or leaving the school campus.
- ❑ Behavior causes or threatens to cause physical injury to student or others. May include: display of weapons, assault on others.

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***Generate a Hypothesis Statement Regarding Probable Function of Problem Behavior***

- ❑ concise summary of information collected during the assessment phase, a statement that explains or represents a "best guess" regarding the reason(s) for the behavior.

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*Test the Hypothesis Statement Regarding the Function of the Problem Behavior*

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- "experimentally manipulate" certain variables to see if the team's assumptions regarding the likely function of the behavior are accurate

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Summary: Guidelines for conducting a functional behavioral assessment

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1. Define the problem behavior in specific behavioral terms.
2. Identify antecedent events that consistently precede the problem behavior.
3. Identify the consequences that immediately follow the problem behavior.
4. Consider health, medical and personal variables that might contribute to the problem.

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Summary: Guidelines for conducting a functional behavioral assessment

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5. Form hypotheses about the consequent events that maintain the problem behavior, the antecedent events that elicit it or evoke it, and the health, medical or personal variables that exacerbate it.
6. Take data on the behavior, its antecedents and consequences in its natural environment to determine which hypotheses are likely to be correct.

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Summary: Guidelines for conducting a functional behavioral assessment

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7. Do experimental functional analysis by directly testing the hypothesis if possible.
8. Design, develop and carry out a treatment program.
9. If the treatment is successful, accept the causal analysis as confirmed. If it is not successful, redo the functional assessment.

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