FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIORAL ASSESSMENT (FBA)

As required by IDEA - (Pertains to educational law in the United States)

Introduction

Functional behavioral assessment (FBA) is a variation on procedures originally developed to ascertain the purpose or reason for behaviors displayed by individuals with severe cognitive or communication disabilities (e.g., individuals with mental retardation or autism). Because these individuals were unable to fully explain why they were displaying certain inappropriate behaviors, methods were developed to determine why they demonstrated such actions. These investigatory procedures, derived primarily from the orientation and methods of applied behavior analysis were known as "functional behavioral analysis". By gathering data and conducting experiments that evaluated the effects of environmental variables on the behavior, concerned staff members could usually decipher the meaning of the behaviors (i.e., what emotion or message was being communicated through the actions), determine why they were occurring, and develop behavior change programs to help the disabled individual display more appropriate behavior in meeting his or her needs.

Given governmental demands for accountability in education, and the influence of the behaviorist orientation in the field of special education, when the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was "reauthorized" in 1997, it required the use of procedures similar to functional behavior analysis. When used with students with disabilities who are ages 3-21, these procedures would now be known as "Functional Behavior Assessment".

The Basis for Functional Behavior Assessment

Many students with disabilities display behaviors that are deemed by school and society to be "inappropriate". These aberrant actions may be the reason why the student was provided with special education services, as in the case of students
labeled as having "emotional disturbance" (one of the 12 special education categories of disability). However, other students, for whom different impairments are the main concern, might also display undesirable behaviors. These could include, among many others, refusals to work on tasks viewed as too difficult, angry responses due to frustration of goals or inability to communicate with words, or irritating actions displayed in an attempt to gain attention.

Anytime that educators have concerns about the behavior of a student with a disability, they are required by IDEA to undertake the functional behavior assessment process in order to determine why the youngster is showing such actions. By determining the purpose of the behavior, educational personnel can then devise interventions to help the student display more acceptable behaviors that will meet his/her needs or desires (the "why" of the behavior).

While educators are required to conduct an FBA when persistent behavioral concerns exist (FBA is commonly a part of the pre-referral and referral activities, and IEP development, review, and revision for misbehaving students) they are also required by law to conduct it within 10 days of any singular offense by a student with a disability that is punishable by:
- suspension
- removal to an Interim Alternative Educational Setting. An IAES is a placement, outside of the present school building, where kids who have broken the law, violated an important school regulation, or been aggressive can be sent by the school administrator for up to 40 days. All services presently provided by the school must be continued in this new placement, and the behavior that led to the transfer must be addressed (perhaps via counseling or instruction). The FBA is conducted in order to understand the reason for the behavior, and to devise ways to prevent it’s occurrence in the future when the youngster returns to the home school. In some proactive states, FBA is designated to be conducted as part of an on-going program to identify students in need of specialized services, not only as an isolated practice for severe school code violations.

By definition then, FBA is the process of gathering and analyzing information about a student's behavior and accompanying circumstances in order to determine the purpose or intent of the actions. This investigation is designed to help educators:

- determine the appropriateness of the student’s present educational placement and services, and whether changes would help the student to display more acceptable behavior
- identify positive interventions that would reduce the undesirable behavior
- identify appropriate behaviors to be substituted in the place of the inappropriate
Functional behavior assessment is based upon the following assumptions:

-challenging behaviors do not occur in a vacuum; there is a reason for their occurrence

-behaviors occur in response to an identifiable stimuli (event)

-behaviors are governed (weakened or strengthened) by the consequences that follow them

-behavior is a form of communication (i.e., educators need to figure out what a particular behavior is communicating. The displayed action might be saying, in a non-verbal fashion; "I am tired.", "I am bored.", "I'm still upset at what happened earlier", etc.)

-"misbehavior" might actually be adaptive (justifiable and understandable) given the circumstances. For example, in a classroom in which the teacher is a ineffective manager of student behavior, the student of concern might engage in "inappropriate" actions designed to bond with, and offer protection from bullies.

In this particular case, the "misbehavior" could be designed to avoid victimization by other students in the presence of the non-protective teacher.

It is believed that all behaviors demonstrated by all persons serve a function and have a purpose. If benefits didn’t result from showing certain behavior, then individuals would stop doing them. Usually, our behaviors are meant to do one of two things:

-obtain something desirable (e.g., attention, money, good grades), or

-avoid or escape something unpleasant or punishing (e.g., penalties, embarrassment, pain, fear)

-FBA is the process of gathering and analyzing information about the student's behavior and accompanying circumstances in order to determine the purpose or intent of the actions.

-FBA was designed to help us:

- determine the appropriateness of placement and services
-identify positive interventions to reduce the undesirable behavior
-develop appropriate behaviors to be substituted in replacement of the inappropriate ones.

-FBA is based upon the following assumptions:
- challenging behaviors do not occur in a vacuum
- behaviors occur in response to an identifiable stimuli
- behaviors are governed by the consequences that follow them
- behavior is a form of communication (we just need to figure out what it says... "I am tired.", "I am bored.", "I'm still upset at what happened earlier", etc.)
- "misbehavior" may actually be adaptive given the circumstances (e.g., "My teacher is a ineffective manager of student behavior. S/he can't protect me from the thugs in my class. I better misbehave so that the aggressive kids like me and won't victimize me.")
- behaviors serve a function & have a purpose, usually:
  - to get something (e.g., attention, money, good grades)
  - to avoid/escape something (e.g., punishment, embarrassment)

-The technology for determining the purpose of behaviors has been around and has research support*, but FBA is complicated and time consuming in nature. Costs vs. benefits are questionable.

* The research available when the U.S. law was passed had been conducted mostly by professors and their six graduate assistants with severely impaired preschoolers and adults. It was never (as of the year 2001) conducted with the kids for who it will now be used. It hadn't been conducted by the professionals now required to implement it. The process often takes up to six weeks, but now it might have to be done in 10 days or less.

It will be interesting to see how things work out over the years.

-An FBA must be conducted:
- if behavioral concerns are present (according to many scholars in education law)
  (New York State recommends FBA as part of pre-referral and referral activities and IEP development, review, and revision for misbehaving students. It should be part of an on-going program, not used merely an isolated practice for severe school code violations.)
- within 10 days of an offense punishable by:
  - suspension
  - removal to an IAES (Interim Alternative Educational Setting...a place where kids who have broken the law or been aggressive can be sent for up to 40 days -- with services maintained and issues that led to removal addressed)
STEPS FOR CONDUCTING A FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIORAL ASSESSMENT
(Procedures will vary depending on situation & student's level of need)

Stage 1 - Hypothesis Development

1. Identify the behavior & define it in terms that are:
   - specific
   - observable
   - measurable (see the home page link on "Behavioral Recording" or Activity #1 of "DRO" for explanation and practice)

2. Identify:
   - times when student is:
     - most likely to engage in the behavior
     - least likely to engage in the behavior
   - factors or events that seem to contribute to student's problem behavior
   - specific immediate events/triggers (the stimulus that sparked the behavior)
   - "setting events" (events that happened a while ago, but lowered the student's ability to handle the situation...e.g. missing the bus, being threatened on the way to school)

Accomplish #2 by doing the following:
a. Interview knowledgeable individuals about events and circumstances associated with:
   - occurrences
   - non-occurrences

b. Conduct systematic direct observations in natural settings (guided by an analysis of the indirect information)
   - behavioral recording
   - frequency recording
   - duration/momentary time sampling
     (see the page on behavioral recording for information on these practices)
   - scatterplots
     [Click here to see an example of a scatterplot]
   - A-B-C sequencing (listing the antecedent/stimulus, behavior/action, and consequences)
     (For more information, see the link on "Figuring out why kids misbehave")
   - running logs (continuous commentary on events)

3. Analyze the information, looking for patterns & indications, and develop hypotheses (global & specific) regarding the:
   - behavior's function/purpose
   - factors (immediate & setting) affecting the behavior
   - physical environment variables
- curriculum, instruction & work demands
- social interactions & individuals involved
- biological contributors
- state of mind/emotional influences

*Now place the hypotheses in writing:
- Describe the relationship between the behavior and the environment
- Defend the hypotheses with a description of the data that support them

There are two types of logical explanations or hypotheses:
- specific
- global

Specific hypotheses attempt to:
- explain the function or purpose of the undesirable behavior
- identify the fast and slow triggers (i.e., antecedents and setting events)

Global hypotheses derive from the information gained during the FBA that provides us with a greater understanding of the student and the complexity of his/her situation. These global guesses influence short & long term prevention/remediation efforts. We look at the broad influences in his/her life that may effect programming and it's success.
- skills/talents
- health (physical and emotional)
- preferences/likes and dislikes
- daily routines
- relationships with others in his/her life
- general quality of life

**Stage 2 - Hypothesis Testing** (optional and questionable)

4. Conduct experiments. Verify/revise the hypotheses (regarding which variables maintain the undesirable behavior) by manipulating circumstances & events:
- present different degrees and types of the hypothetical stimulus
- prevent the occurrence of the hypothetical stimulus
- present other stimuli that might have an effect on the behavior
- promote the demonstration of a new, replacement behavior that would supposedly meet the student's needs as well as the inappropriate behavior
Stage 3 - Behavioral Intervention Plan (BIP) (based on stages 1 & 2)

5. Develop a realistic plan of action in the BIP:
   - set goals and objectives
   - describe direct interventions
   - prescribed responses to displays of problem behaviors
   - list replacement behaviors and how they will be taught
   - note changes in services
   - note changes in placement

Stage 4 - Implementation of the Plan

6. Teach positive (or less negative) alternative behaviors that will serve the same purpose(s) as the inappropriate behaviors, and promote their use.

7. Modify events/circumstances associated with problem behaviors so that inappropriate behaviors are no longer prompted or rewarded.

Resources

For more information on conducting a functional behavior assessment (and a free videotape on how to conduct an FBA), log onto:
http://cecp.air.org/fba/default.htm
OR
http://cecp.air.org/fba/problembehavior/main.htm


http://204.98.1.2/sped/functanal.html Provides steps for conducting an FBA

Hey! Why don't we do a functional behavior assessment on mean teachers? We could figure out why they're doing bad things to kids and help them change for the better! Wouldn't it be great if all kids got to witness a teacher who looked like s/he would rather be in
the classroom with them then any other place? Wouldn't it be great to see more teachers who appeared really excited about teaching?

Why does he always do that? What is the purpose of the puppy's behavior?

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