Functional Assessment and Positive Behavior Support: The Role of Early Learning Program Leaders and Teachers

Resources / Publications / Young Children / Spring 2023 / Functional Assessment and Positive Behavior Support: The Role of Early Learning Program Leaders and Teachers

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Authors' Note

We have been thinking about how to help leaders support their staff, children, and families in the face of challenging behavior for many years, but many factors, including political and racial unrest, climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic, have made this problem much more severe—and the need for solutions much more urgent, both now and in the future.

This piece is an excerpt from our recently published book, *Addressing Challenging Behavior in Young Children: The Leader's Role.* In it, we focus on how a specific assessment, functional analysis, can facilitate program administrators' and teachers' overall approach to positive behavior support and to addressing challenging behavior in early childhood settings.

Schools and centers across the country use positive behavior support (PBS) as a universal, whole-school approach to create a positive school climate and prevent challenging behavior (Samuels 2013). PBS is a tiered strategy, meaning that it recognizes that different children have different levels of need for support and intervention. In order to help the 1 to 7 percent of those who require a more intensive, individualized approach, PBS is often paired with a technique called functional assessment or functional analysis (FA) or functional behavioral assessment (FBA). Developed by behavioral psychologists, FA enables educators to observe a child more closely and collect data that illuminates why

the challenging behavior is occurring at a particular time in a particular place. With this information, it becomes possible to create an individual positive behavior support plan for the child.

The most important idea behind both strategies is that challenging behavior is a child's solution to a problem, and this behavior enables them to fulfill their needs. With the help of careful observation and the behavior incident reports staff members have collected, FA allows teachers to figure out the purpose or function of the behavior as well as the events that trigger and maintain it.

With this information, program staff can create a behavior support plan that will empower them to teach the child more acceptable ways to get what they need. Although an FA and behavior support plan are similar to an Individualized Education Program (IEP), their use is not limited to children with disabilities, but like an IEP they may require parental permission and are always most effective when families are engaged in the process.

If a program feels that an FA and behavior support plan would be useful for a particular child, its team members have a few options. They can conduct the FA themselves and build a behavior support plan together with the child's family. If a psychologist or social worker is already working with the child, they may be willing to become part of the team and observe and record the child's behavior as well. Or staff could call in an outside expert from the local school board or one of the many agencies that deal with children's mental health, the local resource and referral agency, or the department of early learning in the area.

How Does Functional Assessment Work?

FA postulates that there are three possible functions or purposes for a challenging behavior (O'Neill et al. 2015):

- to obtain an object or attention
- to avoid a person or task
- to change the level of stimulation (Karsh et al. 1995)

But discovering which of these possible functions applies in a particular child's situation is a complex affair involving data. It usually takes a team that includes a program leader, the family, and anyone else who works with the child, including teachers and teaching assistants, an after-school teacher, a psychologist, or a social worker, plus a lot of observation, interviews, and discussion (Fox & Duda 2015).

To determine the function or purpose of a child's challenging behavior, the team usually employs a method called an A-B-C analysis (Bijou, Peterson, & Ault 1968).

- *A* stands for antecedents, which occur just before the challenging behavior and act as a trigger for it—for example, a teacher's demands or requests, difficult tasks, or transitions (O'Neill et al. 2015).
- *B* stands for the child's specific challenging behavior, which must be described clearly enough for anyone on the team to recognize and measure its intensity and frequency without any subjective interpretation (O'Neill et al. 2015). It might be spitting, hitting the teacher, or running out of the room.
- *C* stands for consequences, which are the responses to the challenging behavior. They can be anything that follows it, including the reactions of the other children or the teacher, and because they usually reward the behavior, they are often called the *maintaining consequences*. Laughing, offering attention (either positive or negative), removing the child from an activity, even providing help can all be maintaining consequences.

It is important to keep in mind that completing an FA is key to identifying the rationale behind a child's behavior, so the more people who are trained and available to participate in this exercise, the clearer the picture will become.

Observing Children

Information in the child's file and the behavior incident reports are a good place to start. But detailed observation of the child and the environment are the most important factors in identifying the function or purpose of challenging behavior.

Finding the time and ways to observe a child's challenging behavior as well as its antecedents and consequences are daunting tasks even for teachers with degrees, who may or may not have learned to observe and record behavior properly. And because teaching young children is in itself so task intensive, teachers may be concerned that they are already stretched to the limit. Nonetheless, they are probably the best possible observers because when an outside consultant enters the room, that person will certainly alter the behavior of the child or the educator or both. (Of course, after a couple of visits, they will not be as obtrusive, and their knowledge of the whole process of FA and positive behavior support will help the team to work more smoothly and effectively.) Program leaders can do observations too, and if they have been in the classroom regularly and often enough, their presence should not affect anyone else's behavior.

What Do Teams Need to Look For?

Before observing and recording the challenging behavior, the first step is to identify the exact **behaviors** that everyone is observing. Teachers often use general terms such as "defiant" or "aggressive," but this language is not specific enough. It is much clearer to say that the child hits, kicks, screams, withdraws, or refuses to follow directions.

This precision will help the team to determine the **antecedents** of the behavior. Was the child busy playing when the teacher said it was time to clean up? Were the other children too close to the child? Had the teacher been paying attention to their peers, but not to them? Was the room chaotic or too noisy, or were things moving too slowly at circle time?

Then it is important to observe and record the **consequences**. Did the other children laugh at the child? Did the teacher reprimand the child? Recording the consequences is difficult because it may require teachers to reflect on their own actions. For example, if a teacher rushes to a child who is pushing another child off a chair, they may be reinforcing the pushing—that is, if the child is pushing in order to get the teacher's attention.

Program leaders can help teachers learn to observe by talking with them about ways they feel might work, such as keeping a pen and a small pad in their pocket to jot down a few notes right after the child calms down and before they forget what happened, or using their phone to record their impressions later. In this manner, they can also capture valuable information about the behavior's trigger and response.

Teachers should also be observing and recording times when the child is behaving appropriately so that they know what engages the child, when and where the child functions best, and who the child enjoys being with. This information will be key when it comes time to build the positive behavior support plan.

Developing a Hypothesis

In addition, teachers should participate fully in the next phase of the FA procedure: using all the data they have collected so far to work with the team to develop a hypothesis—a possible explanation or theory about the behavior's function or purpose. The hypothesis will become the foundation for the team's behavior support plan (O'Neill et al. 2015). An example illustrating the entire process appears at the end of this article, in "Using Functional Assessment and a Positive Behavior Support Plan: Ryan."

Creating a Behavior Support Plan

Once the team has identified the behavior, the antecedents, and the consequences and figured out the behavior's function or purpose, they are ready to construct a behavior support plan. They will need as many ideas and points of view as possible, so everyone on the team should participate, just as they did when they were working out the function of the behavior. (See below for a template of a chart team members can use when brainstorming ideas for a behavior support plan.)

The child will resist efforts to change their behavior unless the replacement behavior is as efficient and effective as the problem behavior, so the plan should identify how the behavior can be prevented, the skills that the child needs to learn, and the responses that will encourage the child to meet their needs appropriately. It is also important to keep the child's positive moments, strengths, and interests clearly in mind (Dunlap et al. 2006).

Behavior Support Planning Chart

Child's name:		
Antecedent	**Behavior**	**Maintaining Consequence**
	Function:	
Preventions	**Goals/Skills**	**New Responses**

Adapted, by permission, from L. Fox and M.A. Duda, "Positive Behavior Support" (Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children) www.challengingbehavior.org

Prevention

Begin by thinking about specific ways to prevent the challenging behavior. This will entail finding and changing its antecedents in the classroom environment—in the physical space, activities, curriculum, routines, and even the teacher's own behavior, words, and expectations. It can be as simple as getting several more popular trucks and dolls, controlling numbers by placing fewer chairs at an activity table, and offering different ways for children to complete a task so that if they are uncomfortable finger painting, they can use a brush (or vice versa). For an example of what this looks like, see "Ryan's A-B-C Observation Chart," below.

Ryan's A-B-C Observation Chart

Child's Name: Ryan

Date	Activity/Teacher	Antecedent	Behavior	Maintaining Consequence	Possible Function
Monday, Dec. 11	Circle/Latoya	Starting a new song	Kicks, pinches child beside him	Told to keep hands to himself	Attention from teacher
		Everyone is singing	Pinches and hits child beside him	Told to leave circle and look at a book. He leaves	Escape from activity
	Getting ready to go outside/Latoya	Struggling with his shoes	Throws shoes across the room	Teacher picks up the shoes and offers her help	Attention from teacher
	Gross motor hopping and jumping across the yard	Everyone is getting a turn in small groups	Yells and pushes Jon	Teacher removes him from group to sit and watch	Escape from activity
Thursday, Dec. 14	Art activity/Latoya	Started work, looked around at other children's work	Dumps the glue on the table and pushes his chair over	Teacher removes him from the activity	Escape from activity
	Storytime/Mike	Teacher starts reading	Gets up on his knees so other children cannot see	Teacher tells him to sit down	Attention from teacher
Friday, Dec. 15	Arrival/Maya	Other children involved in a variety of activities	Walks to block area and knocks over structure	Children yell at him	Attention from peers
	Circle time/Latoya	Playing "Bug in a Rug"	Hits child beside him	Teacher asks him to leave circle. He leaves	Escape from activity
	Lunch time/Latoya	Teacher reminds him that it is his turn to pour the milk	Pushes over his chair and kicks it	Teacher places him at a table by himself with his lunch and a glass of milk	Escape from pouring the milk

Replacement Behaviors

Next the team must decide which skills the child needs to learn and how they will help the child replace their inappropriate behavior with appropriate behavior. Enabling the child to use an appropriate replacement behavior is the major goal. What can the child do that serves the same purpose? What skills do they have to learn? This inevitably involves teaching (O'Neill et al. 2015). Perhaps the most common skills a child with challenging behavior needs to learn are how to ask for help and how to ask for a break, but the possibilities are many and various. They may require help with joining a group; with throwing and catching a ball; with managing anger or finding a quiet space or a way to

reduce their anxiety when they feel overwhelmed. The team should identify the steps required for the child to learn the new skill and start by choosing a skill that is easy to learn, preferably one based on the child's strengths, so that they will quickly experience success.

Responses to the Child's Behavior

The team must also select responses to use when the child behaves appropriately and when they behave inappropriately. If the function of the behavior is to obtain attention, the team must remember that the child's need for attention is very real, and they must provide the child with attention when the child is acting appropriately (but not when they are acting inappropriately).

What form will this positive reinforcement take? Again, the teachers must focus on what the child enjoys and is good at and figure out how they will make extra time to talk and play with the child. For example, if the child likes puzzles, the teacher might decide to spend special time with them at the puzzle table. If they enjoy cooking or baking, the teacher can create a cake-making project where the child can act as the first assistant chef. Or the teacher can plan to play with them and their beloved trucks or trains or bank time with them (Driscoll & Pianta 2010; Spiegel 2012).

Working out ways to deal with the child's inappropriate behavior will probably be much more difficult because the team must respond without rewarding the behavior. In cases where the function of the behavior (such as pushing) is to obtain attention, they can plan to ignore it and choose a different response (such as talking first to the child being pushed).

Enabling the child to use an appropriate replacement behavior is the major goal.

The team will need a different strategy when the child is trying to avoid something. Removing the child from the situation would reward challenging behavior, so the plan should not offer that possibility. Instead it is crucial to focus on factors in the immediate environment so that the team can figure out which ones trigger the behavior and how to change them. In such a situation, the teacher must support the child. For example, Carmen has difficulty sitting and listening at story time and often pinches or hits the children nearby. To encourage her to participate, the teacher can make sure Carmen has worry beads or a stress ball to hold or invite Carmen to sit beside her, turn the pages of the book, or even choose the story. These solutions may look like prevention, but of course they are preventive strategies and responses at the same time.

Last but not least, the plan should outline a method and timeline for evaluating progress.

What Happens Next?



Teachers and program leaders should be aware that as soon as they change their responses to the child's challenging behavior, it is likely to get worse. This phenomenon is known as an extinction burst, and it will pass. In addition, it may take up to six weeks for them to see the results of their efforts, especially if the challenging behavior has been part of the child's repertoire for a long time. Teachers can start by concentrating on small improvements that they may need a leader's input to notice, such as that the child is using more positive behavior or that outbursts are shorter, less frequent, or less violent.

Once again, an important reminder: start the FA and positive behavior support process well before staff members are burned out and demanding the child be asked to leave the program. A child's challenging behavior is sending them a message: the task at hand is too difficult; the child does not understand the expectations; the child needs their attention; the environment is too loud and chaotic. Of course, not all of the causes of challenging behavior are in the immediate environment, but it is helpful to look at the behavior in this way. If the teachers and leaders listen carefully to the child's message, they will be able to identify the skills the child needs to learn, and ultimately they will become better teachers. Most of all, they need to let go of any negative feelings they have about the child's behavior and start fresh every day. FA offers significant clues to challenging behavior, but it is important to remember that it is not a cure-all, and behaviors may have more than one function. It helps program leaders and teachers to

understand the importance of looking at the behavior from the child's point of view. If they can bolster the child's competence and confidence in one area, then other behaviors may become preventable or even cease completely.

Using Functional Assessment and a Positive Behavior Support Plan: Ryan

The following is an example of how to create and implement a positive behavior support plan based on functional assessment (FA).

Ryan's Background

Program leaders can gain a great deal of useful information by reading a child's file and interviewing his family and teachers.

Ryan is 4 years old. He has been at the Willow Tree Early Childhood Center for three months, and every week his behavior seems to be escalating and harder to control. His mother informed the center that from the age of 3 months he attended a family child care program where he did not present any serious behavior problems, but when he outgrew it at 18 months, his parents moved him to an early childhood center near their home. After eight months at this center, he was asked to leave because of his behavior. At this point his family had difficulty finding a child care place for him, so his grandmother took care of him. After they had a second child, the family moved and was able to enroll Ryan at Willow Tree.

Ryan is large for his age and has poorly developed large and fine motor skills. He can be very helpful and articulate, but he uses his words sparingly, and he often looks sullen and serious. He tries to make friends but does not seem to know how. His teacher, Anna, and other teachers have tried to build a relationship with him, but he rebuffs them and seems to prefer to maintain some distance.

The family has said that he has tantrums at home and throws things when his mom is nursing the baby or when he is asked to pick up after himself. He refuses to get dressed in the morning and gets upset over changes in routine.

Antecedents at the Program

The teachers have said that Ryan's behavior appears to be unpredictable and occurs throughout the day during structured and nonstructured activities, transitions, and frequently upon arrival. For the moment, no one knows what triggers his behavior.

Ryan's Behavior

Ryan pushes, kicks, and hurts his peers without warning and has thrown objects across the room and overturned furniture. As a result, the other children avoid him whenever possible.

The teachers have also noticed that Ryan enjoys doing puzzles and loves trains and trucks and sliding down the outside play structure. He seems to have one friend, Lucy, who also likes doing puzzles and loves the slide, although he often rejects her overtures to play.

Consequences of Ryan's Behavior

The teachers have been responding to Ryan's behavior in a variety of ways, including talking with him one-on-one, removing him from the group or activity, and sending him to the director's office. But regardless of how the teachers respond, no one has noticed any improvement in Ryan's behavior.



Conducting a Functional Assessment for Ryan

After consulting with Ryan's teachers and family, the director decides to call in a mental health consultant from the community resource center. The consultant suggests conducting an FA to determine the triggers or antecedents and maintaining consequences of Ryan's behavior so that they can create a positive behavior support plan together with the family. This will allow everyone to be on the same page and prevent as well as respond effectively to Ryan's aggressive behavior.

During several visits to the program, the consultant observes and records Ryan's behavior and the activities around it on an A-B-C chart. (See the completed versions of Ryan's A-B-C above.) She concludes that the function of Ryan's behavior is primarily to avoid activities or situations when he feels uncertain of his ability to succeed. He is especially uneasy with activities that involve large and fine motor skills. She bases her conclusions on his willingness to leave an activity that calls for

these skills. For example, she witnesses an activity where the teacher has set up a relay race that requires the children to step through hoops laid on the floor. Seemingly as soon as Ryan realizes what the activity entails, he pushes the child beside him. His teacher asks him to keep his hands to himself, at which point he turns and kicks someone else. The teacher then tells him to sit on the bench and watch the activity. He does so without hesitation.

The consultant also makes a point of being at the center early in the morning to observe Ryan's behavior at arrival time. She notices that he stands by the door, looks around, then goes to an area, usually the block area, and knocks down whatever the other children are building.

She feels that, like most young children, Ryan wants attention and finds it easiest to obtain through his inappropriate behavior. For example, he sometimes pushes a child who is engaged in play with others and then walks away.

In addition, she notes that Ryan rarely smiles and appears to have a negative temperament that makes it hard for the educators to offer him support or attention except when he behaves inappropriately. He does not respond and shows little interest unless he starts the conversation.

Building a Behavior Support Plan for Ryan

The next step is to convene a meeting of everyone concerned with Ryan's care: his teachers, family (including his grandmother), the center's director, and the consultant. Together they will develop a behavior support plan that will help Ryan learn appropriate ways to meet his needs. It is important to note that his needs—the function of his behavior—are very real. The goal of a behavior support plan is to teach him how to meet his needs appropriately.

Identifying the Function

After examining the A-B-C chart and discussing Ryan's behavior at home and at school, the team comes to the conclusion that he most often acts out when trying to escape or avoid an activity that he does not want to do or feels he cannot do as well as his peers and is afraid of trying. Joining another child in play—building with blocks, drawing with markers, or dramatic play—is especially difficult for him. His first inclination is to knock over the blocks, grab others' drawings, or throw things on the floor.

Prevention

The group also discusses ways to prevent the behavior from occurring both at home and at the center. They select several possibilities. First, they acknowledge the importance of Ryan's knowing that they care. Everyone will make a conscientious effort to support his appropriate behavior and look for opportunities to connect with him. If the teachers or family recognize Ryan's anxiety or concern about his performance, they can offer help by modifying the task length, their expectations, and the materials while they introduce the activity. For example, during a large motor activity, instead of asking everyone to skip to the finish line, the teacher could give children the choice of jumping, crawling, hopping, or walking quickly. Or the teachers could make activities such as circle time a matter of choice so that Ryan can join when he is comfortable, leave when he needs to, and return if he wishes. They also decide to help him join in play with other children when he arrives in the morning, assigning his teacher, Anna, to stay nearby until he appears comfortable.

Next they discuss adding peer partnering activities so that Ryan will get peer support and perhaps make a friend. In addition, the family and teachers realize that noting and supporting any effort Ryan makes to try or work at an activity is far more important than praising the outcome. Finally, they decide to follow a least preferred activity with a preferred one. Because Ryan does not like to participate in large motor activities, the teacher will tell him what the activity in the gym will be, and she will be there to help him to try it out. If he decides he does not want to participate, he can help her to set it up instead. She will tell him that he can play with the trains when the activity finishes.

Goals

Everyone agrees that the long-term goal for Ryan is to be able to participate in all activities. The group identifies two short-term goals in order to track his progress:

1. When asked to participate in an activity that he feels is too difficult, Ryan will ask for help.
2. When Ryan does not want to participate, he will ask to leave the activity.

Responses

The response to or consequence of a child's behavior often supports the child's needs, whether the behavior itself is appropriate or inappropriate. Consistency is key, so the team discusses how the teachers and family will respond to both appropriate and inappropriate behavior. They note that they must be sure not to remove Ryan from an activity he finds difficult when he behaves inappropriately.

They identify the following possible responses to Ryan's challenging behavior:

- offer assistance
- scaffold
- provide choices
- teach him to ask for help
- talk with him about appropriate ways to let others know what he needs
- identify his feelings with words

When Ryan shows appropriate behavior, the adults will respond in these ways:

- recognize Ryan's effort, persistence, and use of new strategies
- follow up with a favorite activity

The Director or Principal's Role

The plan provides goals for Ryan, but establishing the plan is just the beginning. The hard part is implementing it. Now his teachers and family need to teach him the skills necessary to reach those goals. Program leaders cannot tell parents how to parent unless they ask for this advice, but leaders are there to provide guidance and support to the teachers and help them to understand that the key to helping Ryan achieve the goals they have set is to build a strong relationship with him, no matter how hard or how often he pushes them away. His behavior is expressing a need, and their job is to teach him ways to meet that need appropriately. They should take some deep breaths and be sure not to take the behavior personally or to see it as a rejection, but rather as a cry for help.

In addition to letting him know that hitting, pinching, and other hurting behaviors are not okay, they must teach him appropriate ways to let others know what he needs and reassure him that they will help. When he asks for help, they must really give him assistance, not just say "You can do this." For example, he almost certainly needs some one-on-one practice with skipping, hopping, and other physical activities. Once he trusts his teachers, believes that they care about him, and learns the skills he needs to meet his needs appropriately, he will most likely try harder to behave appropriately.

Another crucial step is helping teachers to become more aware of when Ryan is behaving appropriately. Again, observation is critical. There is a lot of valuable information hidden in these moments, but because the teachers have been focusing on his aggressive behavior and because he has not let them come near him, they may not have noticed any of his positive actions. The behavior plan suggests following up his efforts to act appropriately with activities that he likes as well as building the relationship with him. Chances are he enjoys the activities that engage him and those that provide opportunities for him to get on reasonably well with his peers. The teachers could ask the family what he likes to do at home. He may like the calming effect of sand or water play. Would he like story time or circle better if he were sitting next to Lucy or the teacher? If he likes helping, the teachers can organize things he can help with.

For Further Learning: Professional Books and Online Resources

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National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations (NCPMI): challengingbehavior.org.

Both of these pieces are excerpted from NAEYC's recently published book *Addressing Challenging Behavior in Young Children: The Leader's Role*. To read more about what is in the book and how we came to write it, visit NAEYC.org/resources/pubs/books/addressing-challenging-behavior.

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Audience: *Administrator (director or principal), Faculty, Family, Teacher, Trainer*

Topics: *Child Development, Social and Emotional Development, Guidance and Challenging Behaviors, Curriculum, Assessment, Classroom Management, Assessment, Observation, YC*



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