



**BRAIN INJURY  
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## What is a “Functional Behavioral Assessment” of my Child?

*By Michael Selbst, Ph.D.*

Children who display significant interfering school behaviors present challenges for themselves, school personnel, classmates, and their parents. Their behavior oftentimes significantly impacts their ability to make educational progress. It is critical, therefore, to ensure that all individuals working with the student understand the factors contributing to the behavior and that a comprehensive plan is developed and implemented. The New Jersey Special Education Code (Chapter 6A: 14) provides protection for students who present with such difficulties (the reader is referred to this document for more details), including the need for school personnel to complete a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) and Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP).

F.B.A. refers to the full range of procedures used to identify problem behaviors and their potential controlling variables. It precisely describes the problem behavior (e.g., time it occurs, duration, intensity, location, response of staff and peers), specifies circumstances contributing to the problem behavior, identifies consequences that maintain the problem behavior, and includes hypotheses or summary statements regarding why the problem behavior may be occurring. Data is collected as well to support this summary statement.

It may help to comprehend the FBA as a Five Stage Model (from *Meeting the ADD Challenge: A Practical Guide for Teachers*, by S.B. Gordon and M.J. Asher, 1994, Champaign, IL: Research Press), consisting of the following: Problem Identification, Measurement and Functional Analysis, Matching Treatment to Student (i.e., Development of the Behavior Intervention Plan), Assessment of the BIP, Evaluation of BIP.

In the Problem Identification stage, the goal is to develop hypotheses regarding the motivating factors contributing to the individual’s demonstration of the behavior. Such factors commonly include: gaining attention from adults or peers; escaping or avoiding a demand or request; gaining access to something preferred (or tangible); and trying to obtain or avoid something that is internally or automatically reinforcing (e.g., increase listening to pleasant music, decrease painful headache). In Stage 2, Measurement involves establishing a more reliable baseline level so that staff may better evaluate the effectiveness of the behavioral intervention planning that may emerge. This may be accomplished via questionnaires and observations. Next, the goal is to “Match the Treatment to the Student” in Stage 3. This involves assessing the student’s motivation, skills, and resources; identifying replacement behaviors to strengthen, and selecting intervention procedures (i.e., positive supports to develop or



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improve the replacement behaviors). Replacement behaviors refer to specific skills targeted to develop or improve, such as social skills, functional communication, behavioral control, etc. It is critical for school personnel and parents to set aside time to target the replacement behaviors and to facilitate the student's generalization of learned skills across environments. In Stage 4, the B.I.P. is assessed via checking the use of techniques, monitoring the effectiveness of procedures, and modifying the plan as needed. Lastly, the B.I.P. is more formally evaluated in Stage 5 to measure outcomes, the maintenance of effects, and to plan follow-up.

There are several common errors when schools try to address challenging behavior. These include the absence of a Functional Behavior Assessment. Proceeding without this decreases the likelihood that the behavioral plan will appropriately match the circumstances in which the behavior is occurring. Another error is that replacement behaviors may be omitted. Staff members sometimes will focus on consequence interventions (i.e., what to do after the behavior occurs), rather than design antecedent interventions to strengthen replacement behaviors and minimize the possibility that the problem behavior will occur. Reinforcement may not be relevant, especially if the student is uninterested in the reward offered and / or if the reward is not provided within a reasonable time after the desired behavior has been displayed. Lastly, staff members may be unaware of their own social behavior and the impact it may have on the student's behavior.

It is important for the BIP to spell out how teachers, staff, peers, and parents will change (not just how the child will change). The plan should be implemented consistently and correctly. It needs to include strategies to promote generalization of skills. Lastly, parents should ensure that they are part of the process throughout the FBA, BIP development, and BIP review. Having a comprehensive, appropriate plan that has been developed by the parents and school personnel is much more likely to result in fewer behavioral issues. Consequently, the student will be able to make meaningful educational progress and benefit more from the social opportunities available at school.

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