

# A Practical Guide to Functional Behavioral Assessment



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**What do you do when a student with disabilities acts out in class, uses profane language, leaves school, or strikes another student? This knotty question is one that educators are facing every day; and they don't have to face it alone. Functional behavioral assessment (FBA) can help (see box, "What Does the Literature Say?").**

This article provides guidance in providing appropriate responses and solutions for such situations. The responses involve ways to find out what is prompting the student to misbehave, what consequences have *not* worked, and what solutions teams of educators and parents might find.

## Developing the FBA Guide

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) released the final regulations for IDEA 1997 in March 1999. At this time, a development team of four teachers certified in the area of emotional/behavioral disorders (E/BD) and their special education supervisor (the first author of this article) met to discuss how to assist teachers in their district in completing the FBA process. After several preliminary meetings to review the law and the research on best practices in the FBA process, the team developed

the guide that is illustrated in this article and then provided training on use of the guide for teachers in their district.

In one 3-hour session, the team initially trained more than 300 special education teachers in their district to use the guide. Follow-up sessions were offered for clarification and feedback. The team offered 2-hour retraining sessions each semester during the first year of implementation. In addition, individuals from the team of developers attended FBA meetings at district schools at the request of the school administrators. Over a 3-year period, the team revised the guide, based on feedback from teachers in their district who had used it. Most of the feedback from the teachers pertained to the layout of the form. That is, teachers requested more room to write. The Appendix to this article provides a copy of the FBA guide. To illustrate the use of the guide, we provide the following case study.

## Sammy: A Case Study

We have provided specific descriptions and a case study to help other teachers "walk" through the FBA process (see box, "Sammy"). Figures 1-6 provide detailed illustrations of each section of the FBA, and the following sections explain the uses of various parts of the guide.

Each member of Sammy's team was given the FBA guide and agreed to collect data. The individualized education program (IEP) team scheduled a meeting in 3 weeks to complete the functional assessment. The following is a review of how the team used the guide both in data collection and in completion of the FBA for Sammy. We have divided each page of the guide into sections for clearer explanation.

## Demographic Information

The first section of the FBA guide contained information about Sammy, his school, and the dates of the assessment process (see Figure 1). In this case, the date of assessment was the initial meeting date. The submitting teacher was Sammy's special education teacher because she was his "teacher of record." The dates to begin and review the behavioral intervention plan (BIP) were not completed because, at this stage of the process, the team was only

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**Team members develop a hypothesis regarding the function of the problem behavior.**  
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### Sammy

Sammy is a 13-year-old sixth grader with identified emotional/behavioral disorders (E/BD). He is included in general education classes, with resource room support. Sammy has a history of difficulty with compliance, interpersonal relationships, and anger management. His grades have fluctuated from Cs to Fs, but he has always managed to pass from grade to grade with his peers. According to psychological testing, his intellectual functioning is in the average range.

As a result of recent office referrals documenting escalating physical aggression and behavioral disruptions, the school principal called an IEP meeting to discuss placing Sammy in a more restrictive setting. Although Sammy's IEP does contain behavioral goals and benchmarks, the team has not conducted a FBA.

At the requested IEP meeting, the special education teacher proposes that the team conduct an FBA to address the recurring disruptive behaviors that Sammy exhibits before considering a change in placement. Team members, including Sammy's mother, are to begin collecting data on Sammy's problem behavior. The data are to be collected by direct observation, checklists, rating scales, and interviews.

conducting an FBA. Upon completion of the FBA, the team's next step would be to develop a BIP.

### Assessment and Intervention Plan Worksheet

The second section of the instrument addressed the process of ABC sequence analysis that requires an IEP team member to observe Sammy several times in various situations. Identifying the behavior(s) of concern, the observer also records the antecedents and consequences of each behavior.

Figure 2 presents the completed ABC sequence analysis for Sammy. The teacher entered identified *behaviors of concern* into the middle column. She entered antecedents for those behaviors

### What Does the Literature Say About Functional Behavioral Assessment?

**IDEA.** The 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) require that a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) be conducted for students who have identified disabilities and who exhibit problem behaviors that interfere with their learning or the learning of others in the classroom. IDEA further mandates that if an individualized education program (IEP) team is considering a change in placement based on these behaviors, an FBA *must* be conducted, if it had not been done previously *or* the current FBA must be reviewed and modified (IDEA, 1997). Based on the findings of the FBA, a behavioral intervention plan (BIP) must be developed to address problem behaviors and support the student in his or her educational program.

School personnel have raised the question about which procedures meet the FBA requirements adequately and practically (Dieterich & Villani, 2000; Nelson, Roberts, Mathur, & Rutherford, 1999; Reschly, 2000; Scott, Meers, & Nelson, 2000). This debate continues, even 5 years after the reauthorization of IDEA, because little formal guidance has been offered to teachers and IEP teams.

**Best Practices in FBA.** The purpose of conducting an FBA is to determine the function of problem behavior(s) and to identify the factors that predict and maintain it (Gable, 1996; Zirpoli, 2001). Such factors include (a) *antecedents*: events or conditions that consistently precede the behavior, and (b) *consequences*: events or conditions that result from problem behaviors (Drasgow & Bradley, 1999). Information obtained from the FBA is used to develop a BIP, a detailed discussion of which is beyond the scope of this article.

The steps in the FBA process include

- Identifying and operationally defining the target behavior(s).
- Collecting data, such as frequency, rate, intensity, and latency of the target behavior.
- Identifying the events that precede and follow the target behavior (antecedent-behavior-consequence, or ABC analysis).
- Developing a "hypothesis" about the function of the target behavior(s).
- Developing an intervention plan (Alberto & Troutman, 2003).

in the column to the left. Teachers usually come up with these "antecedents" by asking, "What event or conditions *preceded* the behavior?" The teacher entered consequences of the identified behaviors into the column to the right. Teachers usually determine what "consequences" are by asking, "What event or condition *followed or resulted from* the behavior?"

### Identifying and Ranking Target Behaviors

Expecting Sammy to change all inappropriate behaviors simultaneously would have been unrealistic. Therefore, the IEP team recommended addressing only three behaviors initially. As a result, the team ranked the behaviors by determining which were the most dangerous, disruptive, or socially serious. These behaviors became the three target behaviors to be addressed in Sammy's

**Figure 1. Demographic Information**

Student Name: Sammy Neilson	School: Elm Street Middle School
Meeting Date: October 25, 2003	Submitting Teacher: Ms. Griffin
Date to Begin BIP: _____	Review/End Date: _____

**Figure 2. Functional Behavioral Assessment Worksheet**

Analysis of Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence (ABC) Sequence

Antecedent	Behavior of Concern	Consequence
1. Teacher directs Sammy to an activity	1. Sammy makes disrespectful comments	1. Teacher gives verbal corrections
2. Teacher escalates requests	2. Sammy uses profane language	2. Teacher removes Sammy from class
3. Teacher gives general classroom directions	3. Sammy refuses to follow directions	3. Teacher prompts him to follow directions
4. Teacher reprimands Sammy	4. Sammy leaves class/school	4. Teacher calls parent/office referral
5. Sammy given written individual assignment	5. Sammy begins provoking students working nearby	5. Teacher gives verbal reprimand/moves seat
6. Sammy not working on individual assignment	6. Sammy begins yelling at and striking other students	6. Teacher removes Sammy from classroom
7. Sammy not working on individual assignment	7. Sammy makes noises, cursing under breath	7. Teacher gives verbal reprimand
8. Sammy given written worksheet	8. Sammy is unable or unwilling to cooperate	8. Teacher gives verbal warning/poor grades
9. No apparent antecedent	9. Sammy begins defacing school books/desks	9. Teacher confronts Sammy about involvement
10. Teacher confronts Sammy about involvement	10. Sammy refuses to admit involvement	10. Teacher initiates loss of privileges/detention

behavioral intervention plan. As intervention succeeds, each of the remaining problem behaviors will be addressed in order of priority.

By ranking the behaviors, the team identified striking/fighting as a priority for intervention because such a behavior is physically dangerous. Leaving class or campus was also identified as a priority because unsupervised absences could lead to dangerous situations. Finally, disrespectful language was identified as a priority, because this type of behavior disrupts the class and undermines the authority of school personnel. The IEP team's determined target behaviors were entered in the appropriate section (Figure 3).

**Participant Documentation and Reporting Progress**

The final section of the first page of the FBA guide (Figure 4) documented the IEP team member participation, as well as the method and frequency of reporting progress to parents. Because parental involvement is critical to the assessment and intervention process, Sammy's mother was present and actively participated in the FBA.

**Baseline Assessment of Target Behaviors**

Baseline assessment is a measure of the target behaviors *before* intervention. This assessment allowed the team to determine the important dimensions of the behaviors so they could develop a hypothesis regarding the function of the

problem behavior. Once the intervention was underway, the team would use the preintervention data as points of comparison to measure progress.

Team members gathered most of the baseline information concerning Sammy's target behaviors from interviews and direct observations. According to interviews with Sammy's mother and teachers, Sammy's aggressive behavior and unauthorized departures were exhibited both at home and at school. Sammy's teachers reported an average of five disrespectful comments per day at school, whereas Sammy's mother said that he was "sometimes sassy" at home. See Figure 5 for data compilation from Sammy's mother and teachers.

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**In making observations for the FBA, team members identify the behavior(s) of concern and record the antecedents and consequences of each behavior.**

.....

**Identifying the Function of Target Behaviors**

After identifying the target behaviors and completing the data collection process, the team attempted to determine the function of the target behaviors. Often, the function of behavior is to either obtain something such as a tangible item, attention, control, or sensory stimulation or to avoid or escape something such as assigned tasks, activities, embarrassment, or negative emotions (O'Neill et al., 1997). Many target behaviors can be explained in the context of these general functions.

The team, using the questions on the FBA form (Figure 6) to guide them, agreed on a hypothesized function for each of Sammy's target behaviors. The team then decided on appropriate replacement behaviors that served the same function as each problem behavior, and noted those replacement behaviors in the form of behavioral goals. The team chose realistic and attainable behavioral goals. During the meeting, team members explained the behavioral goals to Sammy, who expressed the belief that he could accomplish the goals and that he was willing to work toward achieving them.

When developing the replacement behavioral goal, the team considered a critical question: Did Sammy possess the necessary skills to achieve the goal? If Sammy did not have the necessary skill(s)—such as anger management, appropriate social skills, test-taking strategies, or recognizing the need for and asking for help—then he must be given additional instruction in those areas. The team determined that

Sammy needed additional instruction in the following areas:

- Anger management.
- Interpersonal relationships.
- Communicating desires/needs appropriately.
- Test-taking strategies.
- Remaining in class or on school grounds.

**Successful Functional Behavioral Assessment**

Several factors contributed to the successful development of the functional behavioral assessment:

1. All team members agreed that Sammy needed an FBA to assure his continued placement in the least restrictive environment.
2. The team prioritized problem behaviors and targeted the most severe for change.

3. The team based all IEP decisions on data, not on opinions or assumptions of the team.
4. The team involved Sammy's mother, and she was completely supportive of the school's effort to help Sammy. This collaborative school and home partnership contributed greatly to the effectiveness of the assessment.
5. The team included Sammy in the process, and he agreed to pursue the replacement behavioral goals. Not only did he assume some ownership of the process, but Sammy also began to acknowledge the relationship between his behavior and the consequences that resulted.

**Relationship of FBA to a Behavioral Intervention Plan**

Teams will find many steps in common to both FBA and behavioral intervention plans, and the BIP should be the logical extension of the FBA. Both processes

**Figure 3. Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team Determined Target Behaviors**

**I. Team Determined Target Behaviors**

1. Striking others or fighting
2. Leaving class or school grounds without authorization
3. Disrespectful language

**Figure 4. Participant Documentation and Reporting Progress**

The following persons attended and participated in the FBA meeting:

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Position:</b>	<b>Date:</b>
<i>Jofinetta Neilson</i>	Parent	10/25/03
Steven Aaron	LEA Representative	10/25/03
Joy Griffin	Special Education Teacher	10/25/03
<i>Sammy Neilson</i>	Student	10/25/03
Richard Armster	General Education Teacher	10/25/03

**Method and frequency for reporting progress to parents:**

- progress report \_\_\_\_\_
- parent conference \_\_\_\_\_
- other \_\_\_\_\_

**Figure 5. Baseline Data Collection**

**II. Functional Behavioral Assessment: Data Collection**

**Target Behavior I: Striking others or fighting**

<b>Baseline Assessment Method:</b>	<b>Baseline Frequency of Target Behavior:</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> parent interview	3 times a week at home (parent report)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> teacher interview	2 times a week at school (teacher report)
<input type="checkbox"/> checklists/rating scales	NA _____
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> systematic observation	did not observe this target behavior
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> frequency counts of target behaviors	3 times a week (parent) 2 times a week (teacher)

**Target Behavior II: Leaving class or school grounds**

<b>Baseline Assessment Method:</b>	<b>Baseline Frequency of Target Behavior:</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> parent interview	parent reports Sammy has "run away" 3 times
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> teacher interview	4 times a week (teacher report)
<input type="checkbox"/> checklists/rating scales	NA _____
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> systematic observation	threatened to leave during observation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> frequency counts of target behaviors	leaves class 4 times a week (teacher report)

**Target Behavior III: Disrespectful language**

<b>Baseline Assessment Method:</b>	<b>Baseline Frequency of Target Behavior:</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> parent interview	parent reports that Sammy is "sometimes sassy"
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> teacher interview	disrespectful comments 5 times per day
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> checklists/rating scales	teachers report as a usual occurrence when angry
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> systematic observation	observed twice during a 20-minute observation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> frequency counts of target behaviors	5 times per day (teacher report)

involve behavioral assessment and identification of target behaviors, as well as potential replacement behaviors. The primary factor that sets the BIP apart from the FBA is that the BIP contains details of the intervention strategies that will be employed to help the student achieve his behavioral replacement goals. For example, in Sammy's

case, strategies could involve use of contracting, token economies, or regular visits to the counselor or special education teacher.

The BIP would contain assessment methods by which Sammy's behavioral progress would be measured. These methods would probably be similar to those used in collecting baseline data

for the FBA. The BIP would also contain a description of what would happen if Sammy achieved his behavioral goals, as well as what would happen if he did not. More specifically, the BIP would present an action plan for what the team should do if Sammy commits a specific behavioral violation, such as fighting or leaving school without

**Figure 6. Hypothesis, Replacement Behaviors, and Necessary Skills**

**Purpose of Target Behavior I: Striking others or fighting**

- |                               |            |    |       |  |
|-------------------------------|------------|----|-------|--|
| 1. To obtain something?       | <u>yes</u> | no | what? | to obtain control of the student with whom he is engaged |
| 2. To escape/avoid something? | <u>yes</u> | no | what? | to avoid "losing face" with his peers                    |
| 3. Other factors?             | <u>yes</u> | no | what? | interpersonal skills deficit                             |

**Hypothesis:** Sammy fights with his peers for two reasons: (a) to remain the class leader by using intimidation and physical aggression and (b) to solve disagreements through the only means he knows (aggression).

**Replacement Behavioral Goal:** Given a conflict situation or disagreement, Sammy will resolve the disagreement through a discussion and will refrain from physical aggression.

**Necessary Skills?** yes no, needs additional instruction in anger management and appropriate interpersonal relationships

**Purpose of Target Behavior II: Leaving class or school grounds**

- |                               |            |           |       |  |
|-------------------------------|------------|-----------|-------|--|
| 1. To obtain something?       | yes        | <u>no</u> | what? |  |
| 2. To escape/avoid something? | <u>yes</u> | no        | what? | to avoid taking tests or quizzes in the classroom and to avoid embarrassment |
| 3. Other factors?             | <u>yes</u> | no        | what? | poor test-taking skills  |

**Hypothesis:** Sammy leaves class and school grounds in order to avoid academic situations in which he feels incapable or inferior because he fears embarrassment in front of his peers.

**Replacement Behavioral Goal:** When Sammy is scheduled to take a test, take a quiz, or give an oral report, he will remain in the assigned location and will refrain from unauthorized departures.

**Necessary Skills?** yes no, needs additional instruction in communicating his wants and needs without leaving school, asking for help and assistance, increasing test-taking skills.

**Purpose of Target Behavior III: Disrespectful language**

- |                               |            |    |       |   |
|-------------------------------|------------|----|-------|---|
| 1. To obtain something?       | <u>yes</u> | no | what? | to obtain attention from peers                  |
| 2. To escape/avoid something? | <u>yes</u> | no | what? | to avoid requested tasks                        |
| 3. Other factors?             | <u>yes</u> | no | what? | occurs when Sammy is asked to answer a question |

**Hypothesis:** Sammy uses disrespectful and profane language in order to deflect attention in situations where he feels academically incapable and to avoid embarrassment.

**Replacement Behavioral Goal:** Sammy will use respectful language when addressing teachers and administrators.

**Necessary Skills?** yes no, needs additional instruction in \_\_\_\_\_

authorization. As with FBA, parental involvement in the development of the BIP is crucial to its success.

**Final Thoughts**

The FBA process can be completed concurrently with the development of the IEP, or it can be completed independently. Whether completed independently or concurrently, the functional behav-

ioral assessment process is complex. The guide explained and illustrated in this article streamlines a technical process by providing IEP teams with a practical format. This format could increase the likelihood that the behavioral plan developed as a result of the functional behavioral assessment will positively affect challenging student behavior.

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**Students often need to develop skills to manage behavior and obtain constructive attention: anger management, appropriate social skills, test-taking strategies, or recognizing the need for and asking for help.**

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**Appendix. Functional Behavioral Assessment Guide**

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_ School: \_\_\_\_\_ Meeting Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Submitting Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ Beginning Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Review/End Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Functional Behavioral Assessment Worksheet  
(Sequence Analysis)**

Antecedent	Behavior of Concern	Consequence
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

**I. Committee Determined Target Behaviors**

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_

The following persons attended and participated in the FBA meeting:

Name:	Position:	Date:
_____	Parent	_____
_____	LEA Representative	_____
_____	Special Education Teacher	_____
_____	Student	_____
_____	General Education Teacher	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

**Method for Reporting Progress to Parent:**

**Frequency for Reporting Progress to Parent:**

- progress report \_\_\_\_\_
- parent conference \_\_\_\_\_
- other \_\_\_\_\_



**II. Functional Behavioral Assessment**

**Target Behavior I:** \_\_\_\_\_

*Baseline Assessment Method:*

- parent interview
- teacher interview
- checklists
- systematic observation
- frequency counts of target behaviors
- sequence analysis (required)
- norm-referenced assessments

*Baseline Frequency of Target Behavior:*

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Target Behavior II:** \_\_\_\_\_

*Baseline Assessment Method:*

- parent interview
- teacher interview
- checklists
- systematic observation
- frequency counts of target behaviors
- sequence analysis (required)
- norm-referenced assessments

*Baseline Frequency of Target Behavior:*

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Target Behavior III:** \_\_\_\_\_

*Baseline Assessment Method:*

- parent interview
- teacher interview
- checklists
- systematic observation
- frequency counts of target behaviors
- sequence analysis (required)
- norm-referenced assessments

*Baseline Frequency of Target Behavior:*

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Purpose of Target Behavior I:**

- 1. To obtain something?      yes      no      what? \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. To escape/avoid something?      yes      no      what? \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Other factors?      yes      no      what? \_\_\_\_\_

*Hypothesis:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Replacement Behavioral Goal:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Necessary Skills?*    yes      no, needs additional instruction in \_\_\_\_\_

**Purpose of Target Behavior II:**

- 1. To obtain something?      yes      no      what? \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. To escape/avoid something?      yes      no      what? \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Other factors?      yes      no      what? \_\_\_\_\_

*Hypothesis:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Replacement Behavioral Goal:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Necessary Skills?*    yes      no, needs additional instruction in \_\_\_\_\_

**Purpose of Target Behavior III:**

- 1. To obtain something?      yes      no      what? \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. To escape/avoid something?      yes      no      what? \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Other factors?      yes      no      what? \_\_\_\_\_

*Hypothesis:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Replacement Behavioral Goal:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Necessary Skills?*    yes      no, needs additional instruction in \_\_\_\_\_