

Bringing Functional Behavioral Assessment Into the 21st Century

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What is a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA)?

The traditional definition of FBA is “a process for understanding an individual’s problem behavior, identifying events that predict and maintain it, and using this information to design behavior support plans to minimize problem behaviors and maximize functional, prosocial behavior (McIntosh & Av-Gay, 2007, p.38).” However, as we

learn more and more about relational and neuroscience, neurodiversity, trauma-informed practices, and behaviors that interfere with learning, we must do better, which means shifting the traditional definition!

As Maya Angelou said, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” Now is the time. We know better! We must update the FBA process to bring it current with the paradigm shift that is occurring

across the nation in regards to discipline and behavior! This is essential for the kids we serve. Our explanation guides our intervention. How we respond to behaviors that interfere with learning depends on what we think is causing them. Our mindset and the language we choose to use matter. They are directly correlated to our students' experience and outcomes (Rosenthal, et al., 1992; Boroditsky, 2011).

The history of the FBA

The history of functional behavioral assessments can be traced back to B.F. Skinner's basic research on behavioral analysis in 1938. It is deeply rooted in applied behavioral analysis (ABA). Studies from the 1940s and 1950s laid the foundation for behaviorism, which essentially means that when looking at behaviors we are primarily concerned with observable behaviors versus sensations, thoughts, and emotions, and that human behavior can be explained in terms of operant conditioning, a simple stimulus-response reaction, which comes from environmental stimulation such as incentives, rewards, and punishments. In the 1960s, research began to identify functions of challenging behaviors. These initially consisted of positive reinforcement (i.e., attention), negative reinforcement (i.e., escape and avoidance), and autonomic reinforcement (i.e., reinforcement that is produced automatically such as self-stimulatory behaviors). Later in the 1980s, functions began to expand to include tangible reinforcement (i.e., positive reinforcement from items such as food, toys, or activities) and a need for control (D.R. Dixon et al., 2012). Often, when an FBA is completed today, the same underlying premise and functions exist. Haven't we evolved since the 1940s? Since the 1980s? Isn't educational research constantly progressing? Why has this practice remained virtually the same over the years? For the second year in a row, the United States Government has reported that ABA does not work (The Department of Defense Comprehensive Autism Care Demonstration Annual Report, 2019, 2020). Functional behavioral assessments are deeply rooted in ABA. Why has this practice, for the most part, remained stagnant over the years?

When is an FBA warranted?

Some would argue to get rid of the process. However, under The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) an FBA is required for a student with a disability as part of a Manifestation Determination unless an FBA was conducted prior to a placement change for disciplinary reasons. In addition, IDEA requires students be evaluated in all areas related to their disability, behavior included. Lastly, best practices would indicate an assessment should be conducted if a team is struggling to understand the root cause of behaviors as well as what supports, accommodations, modifications, and interventions will help address behavioral difficulties.

The paradigm shift

More and more leaders in the field are speaking out against behaviorism and ABA. There is a paradigm shift occurring, moving us away from behaviorism and towards relational and neuroscience approaches that accept and welcome neurodiversity and focus on trauma-informed practices. There are several reasons behaviorism isn't what's best for students. Behaviors are not as simple as what we observe on the outside without any consideration for the sensations our students may be experiencing, their thoughts, and their emotions! If only behaviors were as simple as a cause-effect experience that is only surface deep. Remember our mindset and the language we use guide our interventions. Therefore, if we believe student behavior is a simple reaction to a stimulus to achieve a function of attention, avoidance, autonomic reinforcement, and/or tangible items, we are left with very few options for interventions and supports. What we are left with is ignoring students or withholding our attention, providing rewards and incentives for compliance, assigning punishments for non-compliance, and dangling "carrots" to incentivize desired behaviors.

Here is what I know about those practices. Ignoring students and withholding our attention from them when they are engaging in behaviors is not aligned with what we know about the brain. Our brains are social organs. We need connection! We are wired to connect, and we find safety in others (Lieberman, 2013). By sitting with a student while they are escalated, we can share our calm and help them feel safe. This is how self-regulation develops: from many, many experiences of co-regulation with a safe and secure adult (Delahooke, 2019). Not only does it not align with relational and neuroscience, but it also sends a message of conditional care. That we only care for students when they are complying with our rules or behaving in a way we deem appropriate. Rather, the message we want our students to receive is that everyone experiences fluctuations of their nervous system which will directly impact their behaviors and that we accept and care for them in both the good and difficult times. The evidence of the influence of teacher-student relationships is a positive one, with the effect size of 0.52 (Hattie, 2018). If we are ignoring our students and withdrawing our attention when the going gets rough, we will struggle to have positive teacher-student relationships. This is also concerning because it's more challenging for our students to learn from someone they don't like (Consalvo & Maloch, 2015). Positive relationships between teachers and students need to be a priority, not rewards, incentives, and punishments. If we accept the hypothesis that a student's behavior is working for the student to avoid something they don't want to do, we are going to try and force compliance by offering tokens, rewards, and dangling incentives in front of the child. However, as Dr. Ross Greene states, "Kids do well if they can," and "Doing well is always preferable to

not doing well.” Therefore, we need to dig a layer deeper and ask what lagging skills may be contributing to the why behind students’ avoidance. Why is the student trying to avoid what we want them to do? We all avoid or escape something that is too hard for us, too boring, or that causes us to feel uncomfortable or distressed (Greene, 2014). Avoidance can also be related to perfectionism and executive functioning disorders. We must dig deeper beyond avoidance. Without a deeper analysis, we will have difficulty moving beyond rewards and punishments. Lagging skills must be a focus to ensure long-term change. When demands exceed students’ abilities, maladaptive responses occur. Teaching will change the responses to those experiences, not rewards, incentives, and punishments.

As we have learned more about neuroscience and our autonomic nervous system, we have realized that behaviors can be bottom-up—a response to the neuroception of threat. Our brain is constantly scanning the environment for cues of safety. This is done at a subconscious level. It is an autonomic response that keeps us safe by activating the fight/flight/freeze system. During moments of distress, our autonomic nervous system takes over to help keep us safe. We respond by either fighting, fleeing, or freezing. These responses are not conscious. They are autonomic—a system instinctively activated to keep us safe. In addition, many students have faulty neuroception such as students who have experienced trauma, have anxiety, or have sensory processing disorders. They are hard-wired to be on alert for danger. These students may respond as if they are in danger when they are, in actuality, safe. This is not a conscious response and cannot be changed by rewards and punishments. We need to teach students about their internal sensations, their feelings, and their autonomic nervous system. Our autonomic nervous system is a powerful strength, and it will help us if we listen and become in tune to our sensations. These skills and our awareness will ensure long-term change, not rewards, incentives, and punishments!

Developmental differences can also cause behaviors that interfere with learning. Differences such as early sensory sensitivities increase the likelihood of self-regulation difficulties, which in turn increases the likelihood of behavioral issues (Delahooke, 2019). Students who are non-speaking or who have limited verbal abilities may use unconventional means to communicate their wants and needs. These differences in abilities may cause an increase in behavioral issues. Students need us to understand their sensory differences and preferences, provide treatment, and welcome their individual needs. They need us to create alternative communication systems and teach them conventional ways to communicate. These interventions and supports will change behavior for the long-term, not rewards, incentives, and punishments.

In this paradigm shift, behaviors are the observable responses to both external and internal stimuli (Delahooke, 2019). Students’ sensations, thoughts, and feelings matter. The observable behaviors are just the tip of the iceberg. We need to look deeper and pay attention to what lies beneath the water line. We must stop assuming behaviors are working for students and that outdated functions exist. Students do well if they can. Lagging skills, stress responses, and individual differences are the root causes of unwanted behaviors. As the world becomes more neurodiverse, we need to welcome and accept individual differences. We need to work to make our classrooms more conducive to the needs of all students, not just the ones society has coined neurotypical. If our environments are not adaptable and accepting to the needs of all learners, the environment may contribute to behaviors that interfere with learning for our neurodiverse learners. As Thomas Armstrong says, “Just as we accept that individual species of plants have specific environmental needs (e.g., sun, soil, water), we need to understand that neurodiverse children require unique ecological nutrients in order to blossom.”

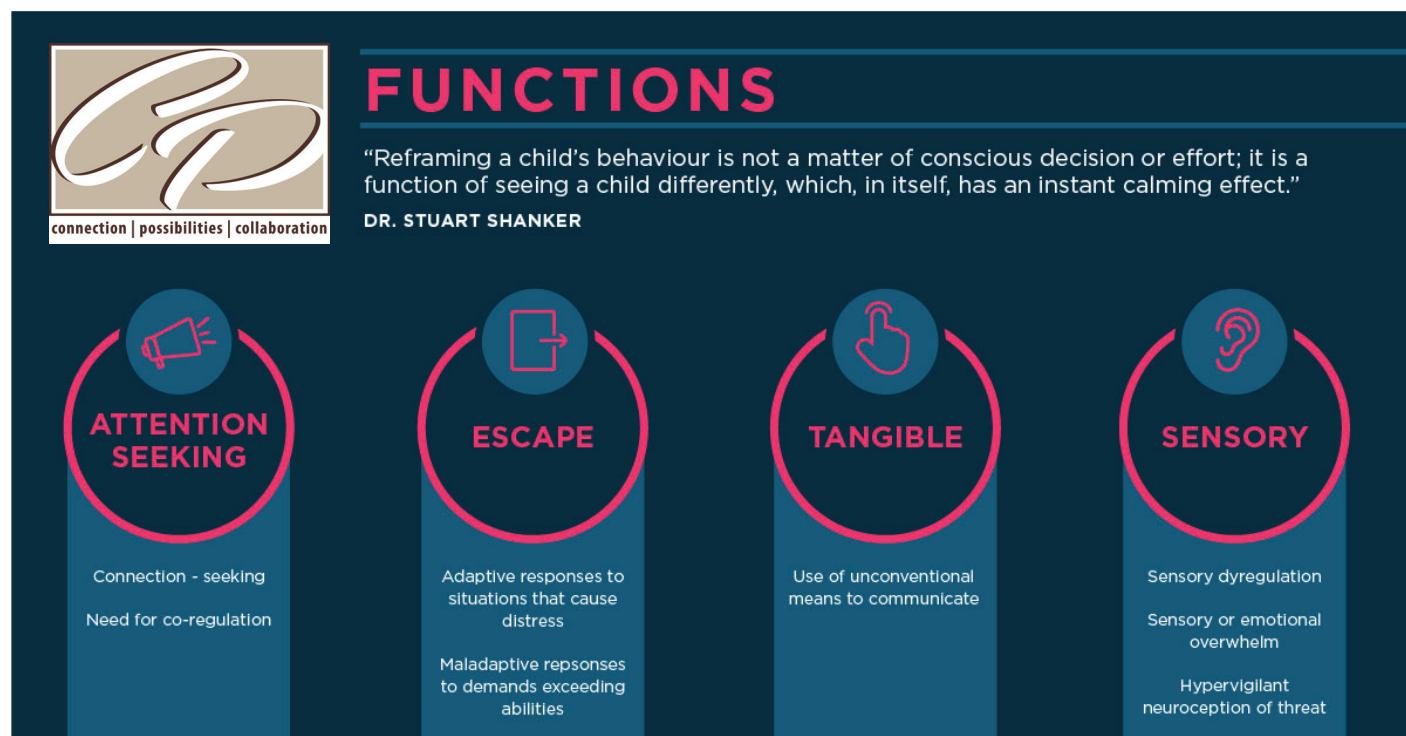
Lastly, school discipline and behaviors that interfere with learning start with us, the adults in the room. We, as educators, need to be aware of our own autonomic nervous system states and triggers. Are we sending cues of safety or cues of danger (Delahooke, 2019; Desautels, 2020)? Behavioral response is a connected experience. What we do, how we look, and how we feel impact the student and what the student does, how they look, and how they feel impacts us.

How to align your FBA with current relational and neuroscience, neurodiversity, and trauma-informed education

Functional behavioral assessments are not the problem. The problem is the belief that behaviors are only responses to external stimuli and functions such as attention-seeking and avoidance work for students and can be changed with rewards, incentives, and punishments. Rather than asking how the behavior is working for the student, we need to ask what is the behavior communicating to us? So how do we start? How do we turn philosophy into practice? First, we change our definition of behavior to include responses to both internal and external stimuli. We use our relationships with students to help us gather information about sensations they may be experiencing as well as thoughts and emotions they are having. We look at behaviors through a trauma-informed and neurodiverse lens to help us determine if our student behaviors may be bottom-up or if individual differences are being welcomed and accepted within our educational environments. We dig deep into lagging skills to determine what skill deficits may be contributing to the behavior. We use our keen

observational skills to clearly state what a child looks like as they move through their cycle of distress, from safe and secure to adaptive protection through action, so that we can offer calming supports and co-regulation as soon as dysregulation begins. Research has demonstrated how

the language we use changes our thinking (Boroditsky, 2011). Our language matters. It's time for a change! Let's create new functions of behavior. Let's shift our mindset in the following manner:



Now is the time to reframe the question, "What consequences will change the behavior now?" to "What experiences will change the behavior long-term?" (Desautels, 2020). To do this, we need to understand our students' perception of their experiences within their schools, communities, and homes. As Dr. Tina-Payne Bryson says, "The difference between adversity making us fragile vs. making us resilient is having someone show up for us and walk with us through it." Let's remember that our response to behavior is a connected experience. We, as educators or caregivers, need to be aware of our own sensations, thoughts, and feelings. We need to ask ourselves if we are sending cues of safety or cues of danger as we are responding to our students. Emotions are contagious so our student's emotions will impact us and our emotions will impact our students (Sigal et al., 2018). Awareness of this is the first step.

Now is the time for change! Let's get rid of practices that were developed decades ago! The world of FBAs needs to embrace the paradigm shift that's occurring today! When we do so, our students and schools will benefit.

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Connie Persike is currently in the process of creating a web-based application for her FBA & BIP forms that are aligned with this new paradigm shift! For more information on the forms or aligning your FBA process with current relational and neuroscience, neurodiversity, and trauma-informed education, contact info@cpconsulting.us.



Connie Persike, MS, CCC/SLP is a highly experienced Speech Language Pathologist and Educational Consultant. As founder of CP Consulting, she brings 20+ years of experience in educational settings to provide insight, guidance, coaching, and support to school districts, agencies, and families across Wisconsin — and throughout the country — who need expert direction in working with children. Put simply: she helps students succeed by working with school systems, parents and/or agencies who have yet to identify the underlying “why” behind unsolved behavioral challenges. She helps identify paths forward that benefit both the student and the staff. No two children are alike - she collaborates with all parties to find an individualized solution that helps everyone thrive. CP Consulting works from the guiding mission that Connection + Collaboration = Endless Possibilities.

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