

SCHOOL BEHAVIOR

Could Your Child Benefit from a Functional Behavior Assessment? What to Know

When a student's actions and conduct interfere with learning, a behavior plan is commonly used to address and reduce problems. But a good behavior plan depends on a good functional behavior assessment (FBA). Here, learn best practices for designing and carrying out an effective, unbiased FBA.

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Blurting out in class. Throwing or slamming supplies. Leaving an assigned seat regularly. When a student exhibits challenging behaviors that significantly interfere with learning, a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) – a multi-step process that aims to better understand and address the conduct – is likely warranted.

Most FBAs result in a formal behavior plan – a document outlining strategies to change and replace a child's interfering behaviors in the classroom (real or virtual). As the behavior plan is based on the results of the FBA, a well-conducted, thorough assessment is extremely important to the student's plan and to their overall school experience.

Parents can assume an important role in effectively advocating for a thorough and fair FBA for their child. Most of this work takes place well before the assessment even starts and influences how the [problem behaviors](#) is interpreted at the outset.

Understanding Functional Behavior Assessments

A fair number of students with conditions like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder ([ADHD or ADD](#)) or who are otherwise in special education receive some form of behavior programming in school. Programming goes by different names, including:

- behavior support plans
- behavior intervention plans
- positive behavior support plans

No matter the name, these programs outline ways to reduce and replace problem behaviors that are getting in the way of learning. All behavioral plans are based on FBAs that preceded them.

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ([IDEA](#)), any member of the child's Individualized Education Plan ([IEP](#)) team can request an FBA when their behavior impedes their learning or the learning of others. There is no specific guidance on what "impedes" means – it's up to individual school districts to interpret that.

FBA requests commonly come from teachers or administrators. As parents are members of the IEP team, they can certainly request an FBA, especially if they've already received notifications about their child's disruptive or worrisome behavior. Parental consent is needed to carry out the FBA, which generally takes about 30 days to complete.

What Does the Functional Behavior Assessment Process Entail?

A functional behavioral assessment should do four key things:

1. Clearly define problem behaviors in the classroom
2. Use data to plot the behaviors in context
3. Provide some ideas (hypothesis) as to why the behaviors occur
4. Offer strategies for fixing problem behaviors (note whether a behavior plan is needed)

Though the steps are clearly delineated, not all FBAs are created equal. In many cases, parents must take steps — especially before consenting to the FBA — to make sure the process is objective and comprehensive.

How to Get a Good Functional Behavior Assessment

Know Who is Conducting the FBA

FBAs can be conducted by many professionals, including school psychologists and teachers. The ideal professional to conduct the assessment is a Board-Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA). A BCBA is someone who has taken advanced graduate coursework in behavior analysis, has received supervision from an experienced behavior analyst, and has passed a rigorous certification exam. Many states also offer behavioral licensure for professionals meeting requirements, but BCBA licensure is considered the gold standard.

Parents should discuss with the school who will conduct the FBA prior to the assessment beginning. If the school does not have a BCBA or licensed behavior specialist available, parents may ask for someone who has prior experience conducting an FBA. Identifying a professional who has an expertise and, most importantly, the time available to conduct a comprehensive assessment, will yield more information to inform next steps in a student's behavioral programming.

Scrutinize How the FBA Defines Your Child's Problem Behaviors

The success of a behavior program begins and ends with the definition of the target behavior. It is extremely important to take time to consider this step, as it guides the rest of the assessment and carries through the resulting behavior support plan, if any. While the definition is the first step of the actual assessment, it's also something that the analyst or school psychologist can share with parents before they consent to the assessment.

Beware Problematic Definitions of Behavior

Many behavior assessments begin with problematic, subjective definitions of behavior that reflect personal opinions rather than objective observations. This matters because how we think about a child's behaviors can influence how we feel about the child, which influences how we work with that child. Subjective descriptions tend to lead to a framework that the child, despite our efforts, is still "choosing" to engage in problematic behaviors.

Some examples of subjective, problematic behavior descriptions in FBAs include:

- frustrated
- noncompliant

- meltdown
- controlling
- tantrum
- lacking empathy
- defiant

These definitions are problematic because:

1. **They all indicate opinion.** These descriptions assume feelings or intent. Little to no information is provided about the problem behavior itself and what the student actually does. What we do learn, however, is what the qualifying person thinks about the student.
2. **They are not measurable.** We usually cannot count or time subjective definitions. If we can't measure it, we can't be sure if the behavior has really changed, nor can we quantify any progress.

Objective Definitions of Behavior

Objective descriptions of behavior do not express personal feelings or opinions. They express only what a person observes, and they are quantifiable. Good definitions of problem behavior are ultimately...

- **Action-oriented.** The definition of the problem behavior is rooted in something that is observable, has movement, and is measurable, versus something that describes an internal state, like frustration. Examples of actions include:
 - crying
 - putting head down on desk
 - hitting head
 - walking around the classroom

For example, a better alternative to “defiant” may be: “When given an instruction, student will leave desk and engage in an alternate activity until the teacher comes over and directly instructs them to sit down.”

How to Ensure an Objective Behavior Definition

1. **Ask for the behavior definition prior to consenting.** The FBA request (generally delivered via phone calls and a letter sent home) won't necessarily state the definition of the problem behavior outright. This is precisely the time parents can, and should, ask for it.

Parents should look for objectivity and movement in the definition. If the current definition sounds subjective, not adequately objective, or unclear, they can ask the following questions to the teacher or the assessor (these questions all work to provide examples and context around the child's behavior):

- I'm not sure I understand what you are looking for. Can you describe the behaviors to me?
- What does the behavior look like?
- What is my child doing?
- Can you give me some examples?

Parents should write down the responses and take note of all the actions described along with their contexts. One way to do so is to circle all actions and underline all contexts, this will provide a quick reference as you move through the next steps.

2. **Clarify.** Restate the actions, examples, and contexts that have been used to describe the problem behavior by the teacher and staff to reach a clear and unified understanding. Continue to ask questions like those noted above if not satisfied.

3. **Solidify the definition with the IEP team.** The actions and contexts parents have determined should be presented to the IEP team and worked within the FBA. Once satisfied, parents can then consent to the assessment.

After the FBA Assessment, Review the Data Collection

In the FBA, the evaluator uses data to:

- Plot the problem behaviors in context
- Develop a hypothesis for why a behavior occurs
- Support whether a behavior plan is needed
- Provide recommendations

Parents should make sure that the assessor used the following data types to devise their findings.

- **Indirect data:** Includes record reviews and interviews with key people like teachers, staff, student, and parents, if needed.
- **Direct data:** Comes from the evaluator observing the student first-hand. Good direct data includes:
 - 3 to 5 observations of the student in the classroom environment that give an idea as to when the problem behaviors occur (notes who is in the room, what activities are going on, and what happens before and after the behavior). At least three data points are needed to indicate a pattern of behavior
 - A measurement of the interfering behaviors. Measurement may include rate, count, duration, magnitude, latency as well as combinations of the measurements above
 - A functional analysis. While not always conducted within an FBA, some interfering behaviors indicate the need for more thorough evaluation. A functional analysis tests the hypothesized function(s) of interfering behaviors, often leads to more clarity in regards to why they occur.

An FBA with only one observation of the problem behavior and minimal indirect data is a red flag. Parents can, and should, demand more information, and ask the evaluator to continue the assessment.

Functional Behavior Assessment: Remote Considerations

Behavior plans are designed to improve classroom behavior, and they typically do not extend to address behavior outside the home. With [distance learning](#) so ubiquitous during the pandemic, the nature of behavior plans are certainly changing. A lot remains uncertain even as the school year approaches, with individual schools and districts approaching these plans differently.

As far as FBAs go in this remote learning environment, however, there are a couple of factors parents should know:

- **FBAs can be conducted over video.** Observations do not have to occur in person. Parents may have the evaluator watch interactions live via video conferencing or record episodes for the evaluator.
- **Parents as facilitators.** With students receiving some if not all of their instruction remotely, most parents will be in charge of or at the very least, team members in carrying out behavior change programs. This can be difficult for parents, who may be working from home, and may not know how to *teach skills* and replacement behaviors to their child. Ideally, a school professional can provide guidance over live video and feedback to parents to allow for behavioral change programs to occur successfully in the home.

Parents should consult directly with the school about FBAs and behavior plans in this distance learning environment. Other sources such as the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) website, has great resources for parents, teachers, and other school staff, including supporting families with behavior plans at home in this time.

The content for this webinar was derived from the ADDitude Expert Webinar “When Behavior Impedes Learning: A Parents’ Guide to Advocating Objectively and Effectively at School” by Rachel Schwartz, Ph.D., BCBA-D, which was broadcast live on July 23, 2020.

Functional Behavior Assessment: Next Steps

- **Read:** [When Behavior Interferes with Learning](#)
 - **Download:** [The Teacher’s Guide to ADHD and Classroom Behavior Understand:](#)
 - [How to Get Formal Assessments and Appropriate Services in School](#)
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