

## **Behavior Function: Staying Close to What We Know**

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Since the reauthorization of IDEA in 1997, attempts to implement function-based behavior supports have increased. We view these efforts as important enhancements toward improving the effectiveness, efficiency, and relevance of educational programming for students with problem behaviors. However, we are becoming increasingly concerned by the potential for misapplication and over-extension of the function-based approach to behavior support programming. Thus, the purpose of this brief commentary is to describe considerations in the identification of behavior functions. This commentary describes potential misapplications in the identification of behavioral functions and offers readings for a more complete review of the issues and process.

### **Misapplications and Summary of What We Know**

Schools should be commended for their efforts to adopt a function-based approach to behavior support programming. This approach has a long history of theoretical development, research validations, and practical applications. However, a number of limitations exist and should be acknowledged to avoid the development of misapplications.

### **Theoretical Foundations Are Behavioral**

The function-based approach to behavior support programming is founded theoretically on a behavior analytic tradition of teaching and learning. Early behavioral psychologists and educators demonstrated that individual performance or behavior could be explained by the influence of a variety of environmental factors. In general, antecedent events trigger or occasion behavior, and consequence events affect the probability that a behavior will occur (reinforcement) or not occur (punishment). When describing the functions that maintain problem behavior (or any behavior), hypothesis statements are narrowed to two primary behavioral principles:

1. Positive reinforcement is the condition in which a behavior has an increased likelihood of occurring in the future if something (object or event) is given or presented after the behavior occurs.
2. Negative reinforcement is the condition in which a behavior has an increased likelihood of occurring in the future if something (object or event) is avoided, escaped, or removed after the behavior occurs.

The theoretical and empirical supports for these two behavioral principles are extensive in range and depth. Extensions of function-based behavior support to other theoretical approaches and disciplines have not been demonstrated. For example, non-behavioral functions such as, “control,” “authority,” “bullying,” “anger management,” and “intimidation” are appearing as behavioral functions. These labels are inappropriate because they (a) go beyond the behavioral foundations, (b) locate the problem within the students, (c) lack empirical verification, (d) are not observable and therefore measurable, and (e) focus responsibility for change on the student. Of equal importance, these labels are not useful in the active design of behavior support.

For example, a student who engages in verbal threats and profanity may be viewed as having behaviors that are maintained by “a need for control.” This may lead to intervention strategies to address his need for control. Historically this approach to intervention development has not been associated with reduction in problem behavior. Describing behavior as maintained by a “need for control” is consistent with colloquial ways of describing behavior, but not with a function-based logic. A function-based approach would identify those consequences (events or objects that the student either gained or escaped) when he used verbal threats and profanity. In this example, the student is more likely to engage in problem behaviors when a demand is presented, but he is unclear about what to do. He finds these situations highly aversive, and his verbal behavior is associated with rapid removal from the unpleasant context. In this way his verbal threats and profanity are viewed as maintained by escape from a specific type of demand context. The intervention designed to address this hypothesis is likely to be much more targeted, instructive and effective. The main reason for defining the function of problem behaviors is to guide the design of effective and efficient behavior support. The more precise and clearer the identification of the behavioral function, the more helpful for development of support strategies.

### **Behavior Expertise Is Needed**

Understanding problem behavior and developing and implementing behavior support plans based on this understanding can appear deceptively simple and straightforward. However, the reality is that function-based behavior support planning becomes increasingly more intricate as the intensity and complexity of student problem behavior increases, for example,

1. Behaviors that are low frequency but high intensity (e.g., vandalism, fighting, running away).
2. Behaviors that have multiple functions (e.g., profanity is used in one situation for accessing attention and in another situation to avoid attention).
3. Large and multiple response classes of problem behaviors (e.g., profanity, hitting, stealing, crying, and biting hand are used to access peer attention).
4. Behaviors that are “covert” and difficult to observe (e.g., drug/tobacco use, stealing, cheating, lying)
5. Behaviors that are situation-specific (e.g., profanity is observed when a particular teacher corrects

the student, but not with other teachers, or in other situations).

6. Behaviors that have a long history (e.g., early antisocial behaviors).

Because of this complexity, we recommend that function-based behavior support planning should be conducted by a team whose members know the student, have behavioral fluency and expertise, follow a best-practice and evidence-based approach, and emphasize a strength-based and person-centered approach to problem solving and plan development. This team should rely on multiple forms of data (e.g., direct observation, interview, archival review) that are collected from multiple sources (e.g., student, family members, teachers) to maximize their ability to agree upon a behavior function and to build a function-based behavior support plan. In addition, data should be collected regularly and frequently to provide maximum opportunities to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention plan and to make modifications quickly.

The purpose of this brief commentary was to remind practitioners, family members, staff developers, administrators, etc. about what we know about function-based behavior support programming. The basic message is that we must stay close to what we know and avoid creating applications and practices that are not supported by our behavior analytic, empirically-based, and applied knowledge base. The following guide should be used as a self-assessment and reminder about the important features of a function-based behavior support process.

### Self-Assessment Guide to Function-based Behavior Support Planning

In Practice?		Guideline
Yes	No	1. Define behavior in <b>observable/measurable</b> terms
Yes	No	2. Consider <b>response classes</b> (behaviors with similar function)
Yes	No	3. Base behavior function on either <b>positive or negative reinforcement</b>
Yes	No	4. Collect <b>data to confirm</b> behavior function
Yes	No	5. Consider behavior function when selecting, teaching, and strengthening <b>replacement behaviors</b>
Yes	No	6. Consider behavior function when developing features of <b>behavior intervention plan</b>
Yes	No	7. Collect <b>data</b> continuously to assess and improve <b>impact</b> of behavior intervention plan
Yes	No	8. Collect <b>data</b> continuously to confirm accuracy and consistency of <b>implementation</b> of behavior intervention plan
Yes	No	9. Use <b>team</b> to engage in function-based behavior support planning
Yes	No	10. Establish <b>behavioral expertise</b> and fluency within school

Yes	No	11. Apply <b>person-centered approach</b> (student & family)
Yes	No	12. Develop <b>comprehensive behavior support plan</b> that includes function-based behavior intervention plan

For more in-depth information about behavior functions, function-based behavior support planning, and this self-assessment guide, visit [www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org) and see the following selected references:

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