

Positive Intervention for Students in Special Education: Functional Behavior Assessments

Schools have a great responsibility to develop plans that address a student's behavior needs. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, the law which governs special education), an IEP team must consider what "appropriate positive behavioral interventions, strategies, and supports" are needed to address a child's behavior when behavior interferes with learning. In addition, when a child is suspended, the schools must conduct "a functional behavioral assessment and implement a behavior intervention plan" to address the behavior. **If this sounds confusing to you, you are not alone.** If your child has a disability and behavior needs, this information may help you direct your Region on how to develop a behavior intervention plan. Here are the basics:



What is a functional behavior assessment (FBA)? A functional behavior assessment is an evaluation that tries to figure out what causes a child's disruptive (or "bad") behavior. All children have good moments and bad moments - by closely observing a child's behavior throughout a child's school day (or days), an FBA helps show educators what conditions lead to challenging ("bad") behavior and also what leads to on-task, positive behavior. For example, an FBA may discover that a child only misbehaves at certain times of the day, or when doing certain things (or as a result of certain kinds of outside "triggers"—like being called on in class).

How do FBA's work? A functional behavioral assessment should be conducted with the people that know a student's behavior - teachers, parents, guardians, counselors, the student, etc., as well as with professionals from the school based support team. The team that conducts the assessment will:

- **Identify and define the behavior:** The team will identify the negative behaviors that need to be addressed - for example, tantrumming, hitting, or crying.
- **Identify the possible contextual factors behind the behavior:** The team should then determine the factors that cause the behavior, including internal factors (for example, learning problems or hyperactivity) and external factors (for example, time of day, type of activity, etc.).
- **Form and test a hypothesis:** Once the team has a good idea of the factors that cause misbehavior, they should develop a theory— for example, "John tends to misbehave when reading tasks last more than five minutes." Finally, the plan needs to be tested! This means setting up times when the teacher gives John long reading tasks and times when the teacher makes sure all reading tasks are short. John's behavior will be observed and charted during these times to see if, in fact, long reading tasks lead to the negative behavior.

What is a positive behavior plan? Once the functional behavior assessment makes it clear why a behavior happens, the team can create a plan to address the behavior. The plan should include:

- The modifications (changes) that can be made in class activities, school schedule, etc. to prevent the behavior from occurring. (In John's case, above, the change is shorter reading tasks.)
- Building the short term skills that the student needs to manage the behavior
- Mapping exactly how the school staff needs to respond to the behavior.
- Long term plans for addressing the behavior.



How do I make sure my child gets a proper FBA? Unfortunately it won't be easy. Most regions and schools in NYC today are ill equipped to do proper FBA's. First, request an FBA in writing to the director of your child's program (principal or supervisor). If you feel they are not familiar with the process, you will need either an advocate, the assistance of a knowledgeable professional, or a lot of literature and determination.