

*Preface***Including the Functional Behavioral Assessment Technology in Schools** 145

George Sugai and Robert H. Horner

*Articles***Overview of the Functional Behavioral Assessment Process** 149George Sugai, Teri Lewis-Palmer,  
and Shanna Hagan-Burke**Contextual, Conceptual, and Empirical Foundations of Functional Behavioral Assessment in Schools** 161

Deanne A. Crone and Robert H. Horner

**Behavioral Issues and IDEA: Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports and the Functional Behavioral Assessment in the Disciplinary Context** 173Brennan L. Wilcox, H. Rutherford Turnbull III,  
and Ann P. Turnbull**Functional Assessment and Comprehensive Early Intervention** 189Joshua K. Harrower, Lise Fox, Glen Dunlap,  
and Don Kincaid**Elements of Behavior Support Plans: A Technical Brief** 205Robert H. Horner, George Sugai, Anne W. Todd,  
and Teri Lewis-Palmer**Using Information Technology to Prepare Personnel to Implement Functional Behavioral Assessment and Positive Behavioral Support** 217Wayne Sailor, Rachel Freeman, Jody Britten, Amy McCart,  
Christopher Smith, Terry Scott, and Mike Nelson

## PREFACE

---

# Including the Functional Behavioral Assessment Technology in Schools

George Sugai and Robert H. Horner

*Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports<sup>1</sup>*  
*University of Oregon*

With the 1997 amendments to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), many important practices and policies were added to the implementation of special education in our public schools. In particular, behavioral intervention planning and positive behavioral supports now must be based on information obtained through the functional behavioral assessment (FBA) process. Although the FBA requirements are laudatory, IDEA 1997 provides limited descriptions and policy regarding the “best practices” implementation of the FBA process. Efforts have been made to translate policy and move research to practice (see OSEP Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 1999); however, implementation specificity regarding the FBA process has not been developed well.

## PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW

The purpose of this special issue of *Exceptionality* is to provide educators with information that increases the efficiency, effectiveness, and relevance of the FBA process and prevents the development of misrules about the implementation of the FBA process. In

---

Requests for reprints should be sent to George Sugai, 5262 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403–5262.  
E-mail: sugai@oregon.uoregon.edu

<sup>1</sup>The Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports is supported by a grant from the Office of Special Education Programs, with additional funding from the Safe and Drug Free Schools Program, U.S. Department of Education (Grant No. H326S980003). Opinions expressed herein are ours and do not necessarily reflect the position of the U.S. Department of Education, and such endorsements should not be inferred.

the first article, George Sugai, Teri Lewis-Palmer, and Shanna Hagan-Burke provide an overview of the definition, critical elements, and steps of the FBA process. This overview emphasizes a “best” or “preferred” practices approach based on an empirical and theoretical foundation that begins with Skinner’s (1938) seminal work.

In their article, Deanne Crone and Rob Horner describe the conceptual and empirical foundations that have shaped and influenced the development of current FBA process. In addition to tracing the historical roots of FBA, they also emphasize the importance of understanding the contexts of today’s schools and changing the way we think about assessment of and intervention with problem behavior.

Brennan Wilcox and Rud and Ann Turnbull ask us to look at the policy implications and practices of the FBA process. They point to the important interplay between policy and practice within the context of special and general education settings.

Joshua Harrower, Lise Fox, Glen Dunlap, and Don Kincaid focus our attention on the FBA process from an early intervention perspective. They provide us with considerations and guidelines for utilizing the FBA process with young children with challenging behavior and as an important component of a comprehensive preventative approach.

Rob Horner, George Sugai, Anne Todd, and Teri Lewis-Palmer give us a technical brief on the key elements of behavior intervention plan development. They emphasize the importance of using teams of competent educators to develop behavior support plans that define how the environment will change to help the student reduce problem behavior, improve prosocial behavior, and become more successful at school.

In the final article, Wayne Sailor, Rachel Freeman, Jody Britten, Amy McCart, Christopher Smith, Terry Scott, and Mike Nelson discuss the importance of improving how educators are taught about the FBA process to high levels of fluency. They provide guidelines for both preservice and in-service instruction on FBA.

## PREVENTING MISRULES

A common message across all of the articles in this special issue is the effective, efficient, and relevant use of the FBA process to prevent the development of misrules about FBA. Misrules result when insufficient, inaccurate, or unsupported information is used to guide decision making and implementation. The articles in this special issue emphasize the prevention of the following five FBA misrules.

### “All FBA Information Must Be Collected in the Same Way Every Time”

Although the FBA process is basically the same across situations, FBA information can be collected in multiple ways (i.e., archival review, checklists, interviews, direct observation) from multiple sources (e.g., students, teachers, parents) and in multiple contexts (e.g., classrooms, homes, playgrounds). The selection of data collection methods, sources, and contexts should be based on collaborative decision-making and problem-solving processes in which consideration is given to what is already known,

what needs to be determined, and how much evidence is needed to confirm decisions—all within the context of the individual needs of the student and his or her learning and living environments.

### **“Everyone Has to Know How to Conduct an FBA”**

Although everyone (e.g., teachers, parents, administrators, paraprofessionals, counselors) should know what the purpose, outcomes, and general steps of the FBA process are, only a small number of individuals must have high competence, broad experience, and skill fluency to lead a team of individuals through the FBA process and conduct each step. Fluency is acquired through completion of multiple supervised FBAs. These same individuals must establish systems and procedures that support high accuracy of sustained implementation (e.g., data collection and evaluation).

### **“FBA Is It”**

The FBA process leads a team of individuals toward a specific behavior intervention plan that gives careful consideration to the specific conditions that occasion and maintain problem behavior and to the modification of the environment to promote displays of more effective and efficient prosocial behavior. For students with significant challenging problem behaviors, comprehensive and targeted behavior support plans also must include consideration and development of supports that extend beyond specific behavioral intervention plans (e.g., family support, medical or pharmaceutical interventions, mental health supports, juvenile justice involvement). Systems of care and wraparound processes should be used to facilitate the development of comprehensive behavior supports.

### **“FBAs Are Conducted to Determine Eligibility, Placement, or Manifestation Determination”**

Although information from the FBA process can be used by teams of educators and parents to assist in decisions regarding special education eligibility, placement, and determination of whether a behavior is related to an individual’s disability, the main purpose of engaging in the FBA process is to improve our understanding of the problem behavior and the contexts in which the behaviors are more and less likely to be observed. Most important, the main outcome of the FBA process is the development of effective, efficient, and relevant behavior intervention plans.

### **“FBA Is Only Used With Students With Disabilities”**

Although the FBA process has become a prominent and necessary aspect of special education in the public schools, the FBA process can be applied whenever an improved understanding of behavior is desired or a behavior intervention plan needs to be developed. The use of the FBA process is not limited to special education; it can be

used (a) with any observable behavior; (b) for both problem and desired behavior; (c) with children, adolescents, and adults with and without disabilities; and (d) in home, school, and community settings.

The FBA process is an important tool for educators to improve their understanding of problem behavior and guide the development of useful behavior intervention plans. However, the FBA process does not do everything, and it has specific uses that have empirical and theoretical supports. More important, the ability for a school to implement the FBA process with high accuracy over time requires a solid schoolwide continuum of positive behavioral support that works for all students and staff, and a team of educators who have high fluency with the FBA process.

## REFERENCES

- Individuals With Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* (1997).  
OSEP Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. (1999). *Applying positive behavioral support and functional assessment in schools* [Technical Assistance Guide 1]. Eugene: University of Oregon.  
Skinner, B. F. (1938). *The behavior of organisms: An experimental analysis*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

---

## ARTICLES

---

# Overview of the Functional Behavioral Assessment Process

George Sugai, Teri Lewis-Palmer, and Shanna Hagan-Burke

*College of Education  
University of Oregon*

The research literature is replete with examples that support the use of the functional behavioral assessment (FBA) process. In addition, the 1997 amendments to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act have recognized the importance of the FBA process for students who display significant problem behavior in schools. However, clarity about the specific definition and features of the FBA process is just beginning to be developed. The purpose of this article is to provide a general description of the features and steps of the FBA process.

Although the 1997 amendments to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) emphasized the use of functional behavioral assessment (FBA) in schools, the idea of looking at behavior within the context in which it is observed has been in the literature since the early 1900s. Discussions about functional analysis and functional relationships began with the early writings and works of Ivan Pavlov, John Watson, Edward Thorndike, Fred Keller, B. F. Skinner, and other early behavioral psychologists. They demonstrated that behaviors do not occur in a vacuum but in a lawful and predictable manner that is related directly and functionally to environmental events. Beginning with the 1968 publication of Baer, Wolf, and Risley's seminal article "Current Dimensions of Applied Behavior Analysis" in the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, the behavior analytic approach has grown to be an important means of improving behavioral outcomes for individuals with disabilities. A significant body of research has demonstrated the effectiveness and utility of a functional analytic approach, especially for individuals with developmental disabilities (Blakeslee, Sugai, & Gruba, 1994; Carr et al., 1999). In recent years, the application and usefulness of functional assessment-based behavior support

planning (BSP) have been extended to a range of individuals, including those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and emotional and behavioral disorders as well as those without specified disabilities (Broussard & Northup, 1995; Dunlap, White, Vera, Wilson, & Panacek, 1996; Kern, Childs, Dunlap, Clarke, & Falke, 1994; Lewis & Sugai, 1993; Lewis-Palmer, 1998; Sasso et al., 1992; Umbreit, 1995).

IDEA 1997 has heightened attention on the FBA process; however, two challenges to the implementation of the functional approach must be addressed. First, the amendments do not give practitioners who are unfamiliar with the developmental history and research base of FBA specific information about what FBA is and what the FBA process looks like. Second, some individuals who might have a basic knowledge about the FBA process lack experience and fluency with the actual implementation process. They are inefficient and ineffective in (a) applying the FBA process to a full range of problem behaviors, (b) managing the process with a large number of students, (c) collecting and using data to assess and modify ineffective interventions, (d) teaching others about the process, (e) clarifying the difference between best practice and policy, (f) sustaining accurate implementation of the FBA process for and across individuals, or a combination of these.

To address and precorrect for these challenges, this article provides an overview of the FBA process. This article is organized around "frequently asked questions." Responses to the questions include general guidelines for completing the FBA process. Brief descriptions of the necessary components required to implement the FBA process within a school also are presented. Our focus is on completing the FBA. For information about building comprehensive behavior support plans, see Horner, Sugai, Todd, and Lewis-Palmer (1999–2000/this issue).

## WHAT IS FBA?

Functional behavioral assessment is a systematic *process* for understanding problem behavior and the factors that contribute to its occurrence and maintenance (Horner, 1994; O'Neill et al., 1997; Repp, 1994; Sugai et al., 2000). More important, information collected during the FBA process serves as the basis for developing individualized and comprehensive behavior intervention plans (BIP). By identifying the behavior and the context in which the behavior occurs, the efficiency and effectiveness of the subsequent BIP is increased (Horner, 1994; O'Neill et al., 1997; Sugai, Horner, & Sprague, 1999; Sugai, Lewis-Palmer, & Hagan, 1998). The FBA process should be viewed as a problem-solving strategy that consists of problem identification, information collection and analysis, intervention planning, and monitoring and evaluation.

A major outcome of the FBA process is a summary or hypothesis statement that describes the problem behaviors and the factors that are believed to be associated with occurrence and nonoccurrence of the problem behavior. Thus, whenever FBA information is being collected, the goal of developing a summary statement always should be maintained and emphasized. A complete summary statement is composed of four key components: (a) identifying the problem behavior (e.g., verbal aggression, profanity, noncompliance), (b) triggering antecedents or events that predict when the behavior is likely to occur (e.g., request to complete difficult tasks, peer teasing), (c) maintaining consequences or events that

increase the likelihood of the behavior happening in the future (e.g., avoid difficult tasks, gain peer attention), and (d) setting events or factors that make the problem behavior worse (e.g., lack of peer contact in previous 30 min, missed breakfast).

Accessing problem behaviors, triggering antecedents, and maintaining consequences is relatively easy (e.g., interviews, direct observations); however, the identification of setting events can be difficult. Setting events are circumstances or factors that make the problem behavior worse (more likely to occur or be more intense) by temporarily changing the value of typical consequence events. For example, when a student has a painful ear infection, the reinforcement value of verbal praise and high grades decreases, the corrective power of simple verbal reprimands decreases, and the value of avoiding adult attention increases. Other examples of setting events include fatigue, hunger, social conflict, routine change, academic failure, and so forth.

### WHY DO AN FBA?

The primary purpose of completing an FBA is to enhance the effectiveness, efficiency, and relevance of BIPs (Horner, 1994; O'Neill et al., 1997; Repp, 1994; Sugai et al., 1999). The information collected and summarized during the FBA provides the basis for selecting specific and individualized strategies and supports for a student. More important, FBA information also guides the development of scripts and procedures for adults who will implement the BIP. Clearly, the impact of the BIP on student behavior is related directly to the accuracy with which the BIP is implemented.

Although FBA information can be collected in multiple ways (e.g., interviews, ratings, direct observation), it is essential to remember that the main reason we conduct FBAs is to improve our understanding of the problem behavior and guide the development of effective, efficient, and relevant BIPs. At present, we do not have the research base that enables us to use FBAs to determine directly (a) special education eligibility, (b) placement, or (c) whether a problem behavior is a manifestation of a disability. However, FBA information may be used to guide and inform regarding these decisions. For example, a change of placement might be recommended because the current environment lacks the supports and resources to implement the BIP.

### WHO DOES AN FBA?

As a process, the FBA is conducted by a team of individuals who have (a) direct experience with the student (e.g., teachers, family members, counselors); (b) behavioral expertise to lead the FBA process, collect FBA information, recommend strategies for the BIP, and so on (e.g., school psychologists, school counselors, special educators); and (c) administrative authority to support and make recommendations regarding personnel, resources, time, and so on. To the greatest degree possible, the student also should be involved.

At least one individual on the team must have the behavioral competence and expertise to lead the FBA process from problem identification, through information collection and analysis, to intervention implementation and monitoring. In addition, this person



must have a working knowledge and fluency with the full range of BIP strategies for (a) minimizing, preventing, or neutralizing the impact of setting events; (b) removing antecedent events that trigger problem behavior and adding prompts that occasion appropriate behaviors; (c) teaching appropriate replacement behaviors (e.g., self-management, social skills, adaptive responses); and (d) removing consequent events that maintain problem behavior (e.g., extinction, DRO) and adding reinforcers that encourage appropriate behavior (e.g., positive reinforcement).

In sum, this individual is responsible for facilitating the team process, designing the assessment, summarizing the findings, and guiding the development of the support plan. Typically, the FBA process is led by school psychologists, school counselors, administrators, special educators, or a combination of these. However, any staff person can lead the process as long as he or she has the behavioral capacity and experience with the FBA process.

### WHEN SHOULD AN FBA BE DONE?

From a “best” or “preferred” practices perspective, FBAs should be completed whenever a problem behavior is difficult to understand or a behavior intervention plan is needed to increase student success. Although the general FBA problem-solving process is basically the same across problem types, the intensity and complexity of individual FBA activities will vary; that is, not all problem behaviors and situations will require the same level of activity. For example, a teacher notices that every time Morrey makes noises in class, his peers tell him to be quiet, and then an argument occurs. Having seen Morrey engage in these behaviors a number of times, the teacher concludes that Morrey makes noises in class to access peer attention. Therefore, the teacher tells students to ignore Morrey’s noises, teaches Morrey how to access peer attention in more appropriate ways, and provides positive reinforcers whenever he uses more appropriate behaviors. Basically, the teacher has assessed the situation from a functional perspective and has developed an intervention based on this assessment. In contrast, another teacher cannot figure out what triggers Leslie’s temper tantrum episodes in which she throws her books, slaps her hands against the floors and walls, and screams out the windows; previous intervention attempts have produced little improvement. Therefore, to improve her understanding of the problem and modify the currently unsuccessful BIP, Leslie’s teacher asks the school psychologist to interview Leslie; conduct direct observations in three periods each day for 2 days; review Leslie’s educational file; and lead a BSP meeting with Leslie’s dad, counselor, physical education teacher, and special education teacher. In both of these examples, problem behavior is identified, information is collected and analyzed, and an intervention is developed based on the assessment information. What varies is the intensity and complexity of the process.

In general, a two-level FBA approach should be considered (see Figure 1). At the preliminary level, the objective is to collect the smallest amount of useful information that results in summary statements to which key individuals can agree and have high confidence about their accuracy. Information might be collected through brief interviews, archival review of discipline incidents, or informal direct observations. If high agreement