SPECIAL EDUCATION GUIDANCE

# Functional Behavior Assessments

## Building Readiness for IEP Teams to Develop Meaningful and Educationally Relevant FBAs

Educators who serve on school teams must be prepared to address students' academic, functional, behavioral, social and emotional, and mental health needs. Furthermore, they must aim to do so in an unbiased manner, especially for students from historically marginalized demographic groups (e.g., students of color, students who live in poverty, students with disabilities, multilingual learners, students who are LGBTQ+ lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or other). To identify, address, and reduce the negative impact of bias, the team should explicitly identify and agree to norms for how the team will interact throughout the FBA process. For additional information on this topic, see Vulnerable Decision Point 1 Forming IEP Team Communication Norms.

**Addressing Bias in the FBA Process**

For an FBA to accurately identify the function and root cause of behaviors so that the team can identify effective strategies to support a student, adults must first examine their own biases and beliefs about student behavior and consider the social norms of the school community. FBA team members should focus on adapting the response or approach of those who interact with the student, as well as making changes to the student's environment. In addition, FBA team members must be vigilant in continuously examining and addressing their own biases and beliefs about race, ability, socioeconomic status, and other factors that impact our perceptions of student behavior. For additional information, see Inclusive Strategies to Address Behavioral Needs for Students with IEPs, with particular attention to The Impact of Behavior, Bias, and Adult Practice and Strategies to Change Mindsets: How Adults Proactively Prepare for Behaviors that Interfere with Learning.

**Readiness Factors**

The DPI developed the following underlying readiness factors for those conducting functional behavioral assessments that include the attitudes, beliefs, and systems required to implement FBAs in a manner that is meaningful and educationally relevant to improve outcomes for students with IEPs.

- **Behavior is Communication**: An individual who holds this belief understands behavior by trying to determine what message or messages the behavior is communicating. Behavior is a signal or indicator of a person's sensory or emotional state. Behavior is a response. The key to identifying the function and root cause of behavior is discovering what that behavior is communicating to others. If the IEP team cannot identify what the student is trying to communicate, then the efforts put into interventions may not be meaningful or relevant to the student.

- **Behavior is Often Complex:** An individual holding this belief understands student behavior and the response of others to student behavior is a complex interaction across people, environments, situations, and other contexts. An FBA is not a magic wand for identifying a single solution to complex problems but rather a tool for identifying as many variables as possible related to the student's access, engagement, and progress in school. The IEP team must identify the function and root cause of target behavior(s) that lead to positive behavioral interventions and supports that match to student need, and have the greatest effect on student growth and progress. If the FBA does not provide the information and results needed or the behavior intervention plan does not improve student outcomes, the IEP team needs to reconvene or bring in additional expertise.

- **The FBA Process is Not Linear:** The system and process of collecting and analyzing data is dynamic, fluid, and ongoing. Effective teams recognize that FBA is an iterative process and the data they collect will inform what additional data and information they may need.

- **Act Early**: The sooner IEP teams have a systemic process to address behaviors that interfere with learning or the learning of others, the more likely the student's needs will be met. Acting early can foster social and emotional growth early on, address missing or undeveloped skills, and provide academic and functional expectations that align with the student's current capacity. If an FBA and subsequent implementation of positive behavioral interventions and supports is done early, then those interventions and supports will likely be more effective, especially when within an successful equitable multi-level system of support.

- **Use of FBAs Should be Directly Related to Revisions to the IEP**: Those holding this belief understand that FBAs do not exist in a silo separate from the student's IEP. FBAs identify what, how, and where adults need to change the educational environment and instructional supports to meet the unique needs of the individual student. Educators, whether providing IEP services in a general or special education setting, have the ability to design learning environments and develop instruction that maximize student outcomes. The FBA is a tool that IEP teams can use to identify a student's unique disability-related needs, develop IEP goals, and align services. If IEP teams use FBAs as an assessment or instructional process to "dig deeper" into what changes educators need to make in the student's learning environment and in the instruction the student receives, then the student will be better able to access,

engage, and make progress in age- or grade-level curriculum, instruction, environments, and activities.

- **The Roles of Reinforcement, Support, and Instruction:** This belief reflects the understanding that complex behaviors may require more than one type of positive behavioral intervention or support. For example, although the use of positive reinforcement is an evidence-based practice when used with fidelity, and positive reinforcement is much more effective than punishment, reinforcement alone is unlikely to adequately address skill deficits. Only instruction can help a student learn new skills. In addition, a student may also require accommodations or modifications to access, maintain, or generalize academic, communication, social and emotional, or physical and health skills required to engage in activities across the school day. If the results of the FBA lead to interventions that provide positive reinforcement, support, and instruction, then the IEP is more likely to be effective and educationally relevant to the student.

- **Collective Responsibility:** This belief reflects the understanding that a single individual will not have the same impact on a child as a group of individuals collaboratively working together. This understanding must also be incorporated into the system for conducting an FBA to ensure data is collected using multiple methods, from multiple sources, in multiple environments. Additionally, the team should also take collective responsibility for implementing the outcomes of an FBA through changes in the student's IEP and, when applicable, a behavioral intervention plan. When the student, family, and educators work together to identify a student's needs and develop positive behavioral interventions and support, then individual bias or one-size-fits-all solutions are less likely to influence the types of support the student receives.

- **Improving Student Agency:** This attitude and belief reflects an understanding that a key goal of education is to develop lifelong learners who have agency over their lives. The FBA process can be used to assist a student to have the skills, as well as identify and request the support the student needs to be prepared to find a career, continue their education after high school, and engage in the community. When the FBA process includes the student, then the student has more control and influence over the services they receive. The process also can provide an opportunity for the student to learn how to influence their own thoughts and behaviors.

**Reflection and Discussion Activities**

1) Read Vulnerable Decision Point 1 Forming IEP Team Communication Norms. Discuss the processes and communication norms you feel should be used for the team that is supporting the implementation of the FBA.

2) Which readiness factor do you or your team feel are most important prior to conducting an FBA? Why do you feel this factor is important?

3) Are there readiness factors that you feel are easier or harder to teach or implement than others? Explain why you feel they are easier or harder to teach or implement.

4) Which readiness factor do you or your team feel they have the most readiness for? Why do you feel you or your team selected this factor as being the most ready?

5) Which readiness factor do you or your team feel they have the least readiness for? Why do you feel you or your team selected this factor as being the most ready?

6) For any readiness factor that you feel needs further development at the individual or team level, what strategies can be used to improve readiness in this area? (e.g. develop a professional learning community, engage in professional learning or training, participate in a book study or online module)

7) Which of these readiness factors are more technical (e.g. a skill to be taught) versus readiness factors that are more adaptive (e.g. a belief or attitude)?

    a) How should individuals and teams address readiness differently when trying to improve technical versus adaptive change?

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