Functional Behavioral Assessment

A functional behavioral assessment incorporates a variety of assessment strategies to help parents and educators identify the functions of a student's behavior, including both indirect and direct strategies (Gresham, Quinn, & Rostori, 1999). Indirect strategies include the use of rating scales and interviews completed by multiple informants. Direct strategies include the direct and systematic observation of the student in the classroom or other natural school environments (such as playground, cafeteria, or study hall). Often these systematic observations include an Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence (ABC) analysis, such as the one depicted in Table 1, designed to identify the events that precede and follow the student's behavior. The frequency, duration, intensity, and topography (form) of a student's behavior are also recorded. Frequency observations provide data on the number of times a student engages in a target behavior, whereas duration recording provides information on the length of time a behavior occurs. Once these observations have been completed, a hypothesis statement is developed that proposes what functions the student's behavior is serving.

Table 2 shows the results of a functional behavioral assessment conducted for a student called Michael. Examine the information in this table and then try to write a hypothesis statement regarding the possible functions or purposes of his behavior. Also, note the many different types of assessment questions that were asked as a part of this functional behavioral assessment. Included in the assessment are baseline data that describe Michael's current level of performance in the area of verbal aggression; for example, verbal aggression occurs 9–10 times a week. Given these assessment data, you can easily see how this information can be used to develop the behavior intervention plan provided in Table 3. This plan represents a proactive approach to addressing Michael's verbal aggression, in that interventions are designed to not only support him in reducing this behavior but also to teach him more appropriate replacement behavior.

Because Michael's verbal aggression at times escalates to the point of physical aggression and/or property destruction, another critical component of his behavior plan is a crisis intervention plan. Shown in Table 4, this plan details the school's response to his aggressive behavior in terms of both positive and negative consequences.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Antecedent</th>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Consequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Michael sits in the back of the room during math. He is given a math worksheet requiring him to subtract with regrouping.</td>
<td>(2) Michael begins to talk to peer.</td>
<td>(3) Teacher says, &quot;Michael, be quiet.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Michael says loudly, “Forget it, this is stupid!”</td>
<td>(5) Teacher says, &quot;Michael, get back to work, NOW!&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Michael says, “F___ you! I don't have to do this!”</td>
<td>(7) Teacher says, &quot;Michael, go to the office immediately!&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) Michael leaves the room, mumbling under his breath.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table 2  Team Summary of Functional Assessment Data**

**Student:** Michael  
**Target Behavior:** Verbal Aggression  

**Description of Student Strengths:** Michael is very artistic and draws very well. He is also very skilled athletically in basketball and baseball. He enjoys working on the computer and building things. He wants to work in building construction when he finishes school. His conversation skills are very good, and he is able to discuss his aggressive behavior when calm.

**Overview of Student Needs:** Michael currently receives services for a severe learning disability and emotional or behavioral disorders. Additionally, he has received a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder/conduct disorder, and he currently receives therapy from a local Mental Health Center. Although he is currently in the seventh grade, he recognizes only a few sight words and has mastered only basic facts (addition, subtraction, and multiplication) in math. His severe academic deficits necessitate that he receive one-on-one instruction in the special education classroom. In the last three years, he has been suspended (10 times) for verbal and/or physical aggression.

1. **Where does the behavior occur?**  
The behavior occurs in Michael's reading and math classes in the special education classroom.

2. **Is there a particular time of day when the behavior occurs most often?**  
Michael's reading and math classes are scheduled during the afternoon hours.

3. **How frequently does the behavior occur?**  
1–2 times per class; 9–10 times weekly.

4. **What is the topography of the behavior?**  
Michael swears at teacher and peers and makes threats to harm them (e.g., “You better watch your back!”).

5. **How intense is the behavior?**  
Michael's verbal aggression is very disruptive in the classroom and interferes with his own learning and that of other students. When it co-occurs with physical aggression and/or property destruction, it typically results in his removal from the classroom.

6. **Does the behavior occur with certain events or people?**  
Michael's verbal aggression appears limited to reading and math classes.

7. **How long has the behavior been occurring?**  
Verbal aggression appears to have been occurring for several years, according to his disciplinary history.

8. **What are the circumstances that appear to surround the behavior?**  
Michael's verbal aggression appears most often during independent reading and math assignments. This behavior is not observed during large and small group discussion activities.

9. **Could the behavior be related to medical, social, affective, communicative, cognitive, or other concerns?**  
Michael takes 10 mg of Ritalin (5 mg before school and 5 mg after school). His teachers report that his behavior is much better in the morning hours. Also, Michael has many skill deficits in reading and math. It is possible that the work given to him is too difficult.

10. **Do any other behaviors co-occur with this behavior?**  
Verbal aggression, at times, leads to physical aggression and property destruction. On the average, Michael becomes physically aggressive 1–2 times each month. When it escalates to this point, he will slap, hit, or try to kick peers. On one occasion (last year), he slapped his special education teacher and was suspended for 10 days for this offense. Additionally, at times property destruction occurs (e.g., damage to chairs, desks, books, etc.).

11. **What triggers or antecedents appear to occur before the behavior?**  
Possible antecedents include the presentation of individual assignments (e.g., worksheets), time of day (i.e., afternoon hours), and medication concerns (i.e., medication may be wearing off during the afternoon hours).

12. **What are the consequences after the behavior occurs?**  
Consequences typically are removal from the classroom (time-out, in-school suspension, office referrals, and out-of-school suspension).

13. **What are identified reinforcers for this student?**  
According to the results of observations and interviews, the following may serve as potential reinforcers for Michael:  
- a. Time spent with Coach Harris  
- b. Computer time  
- c. Art time and supplies  
- d. Gym time  
- e. Athletic involvement  
- f. Serving as an Office Assistant
## Hypothesis Statements

Two potential hypotheses were generated by the IEP team:

1. Michael's verbal aggression appears to be triggered by the presentation of independent assignments (e.g., worksheets, independent reading, textbook assignments) in reading and mathematics. These assignments may be too difficult for him. His verbal aggression may serve the functions of escape and avoidance of these tasks, given that his behavior often results in removal from the classroom.

2. Michael's behavior may be due to medication effects in that his reading and math classes are scheduled in the afternoon hours, a time when his morning administration of medication may be wearing off.

## Plan for Teaching Replacement Behavior/Alternative Behaviors and Provision of Positive Behavior Supports

1. Independent assignments should be adapted to accommodate his achievement levels in reading and math. These adaptations should include the following:
   - Use of computer software during times of independent assignment
   - Use of peer tutor or buddy during independent assignments
   - Use of academic contracts using “first-you-work, then-you-play” contingencies to reinforce academic success during independent assignments

2. Michael is to participate in an anger control/conflict resolution training group provided by the school counselor. He will participate in this group two times weekly (one hour per session). His special education teacher is to work with the counselor to ensure generalization and maintenance of the skills learned during this group in the classroom. A major emphasis of this group counseling is to help Michael express his frustration and anger appropriately, particularly during independent reading and math assignments.

3. A daily school–home note system will be implemented to monitor Michael's progress.

4. Michael should receive a medical evaluation to determine if his medication dosage and schedule are sufficient to meet his needs during the afternoon hours at school. Collaboration with his counselor at the local Mental Health Center should be ongoing to ensure continuity in intervention efforts across settings (i.e., school, home, and community).

5. A self-monitoring system is to be designed for Michael. This monitoring system will include the following components:
   - Contingencies designed to encourage Michael to express himself appropriately when he becomes frustrated with his assignments (e.g., asking for assistance, expressing needs, etc.)
   - Contingencies designed to encourage Michael to complete independent assignments without instances of verbal aggression
   - Reinforcement contingencies that include:
     1. Computer time
     2. Art time
     3. Gym time
     4. Home-based rewards via contracts
   - Response cost contingencies designed to penalize Michael for engaging in verbally aggressive behavior (e.g., loss of identified rewards). Major penalties should occur when Michael's verbal aggression results in removal from the classroom.

## Behavioral Goal and Objectives

**Goal:** By the end of the year, when presented with independent assignments in reading and math, Michael will request assistance appropriately from his special education teacher or a peer (e.g., “I need help with this” or “May I complete another type of assignment?”) with 0 instances of verbal aggression (e.g., threats, swearing) as measured on a weekly basis.

**Objective 1:** By the end of January, when presented with independent assignments in reading and math, Michael will request assistance appropriately from his special education teacher or a peer (e.g., “I need help with this” or “May I complete another type of assignment?”) with no more than 4 instances of verbal aggression as measured on a weekly basis.

**Objective 2:** By the end of March, when presented with independent assignments in reading and math, Michael will request assistance appropriately from his special education teacher or a peer (e.g., “I need help with this” or “May I complete another type of assignment?”) with no more than 2 instances of verbal aggression as measured on a weekly basis.
The disciplinary mandates included in the 1997 Amendments to the IDEA require that school personnel respond more proactively and positively to the misbehavior of students with disabilities, especially when the misbehavior is a manifestation of the disability. For example, one of the cardinal characteristics of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is impulsivity. Such impulsive behavior may place a student such as Michael at heightened risk for disciplinary actions such as suspension or expulsion. Using the hypothetical incident and the manifestation form provided in Table 5, try to determine whether Michael's behavior is a manifestation of his disability. You may even want to discuss this incident with your peers and complete the manifestation form together. A manifestation determination such as this is now legally required for any student with a disability whose misbehavior is related to his or her disability, when suspension or expulsion is being considered as a consequence for the misbehavior. If the IEP team determines that the misbehavior is a manifestation of the student's disability, normal disciplinary procedures (suspension or expulsion) used for students without disabilities cannot be applied. This mandate, a source of much controversy, appears to many to represent a "dual" system of discipline in the schools and has resulted in considerable controversy among educators.

### Table 4 Crisis Intervention Plan

Given that Michael's verbal aggression has escalated to physical aggression and property destruction in the past, the following crisis plan has been developed by his IEP team.

**Positive Contingencies**

A token economy will be developed to reinforce Michael each week he does not engage in physical aggression. Specifically, this token economy will include the following types of reinforcement:

1. Time spent with Coach Harris
2. Serving as an Office Assistant
3. Art supplies
4. Other home-based rewards as determined through contractual arrangements

**Negative Contingencies**

- **Contingency 1:** When Michael makes a threat to harm, he is to receive a verbal warning that he needs to take a “cooling-off” period in the classroom (e.g., isolate self in a corner of the room). If he follows through with this cooling-off period, he is to engage in a one-on-one discussion with his special education teacher or school counselor to complete a structured, reflective, “thinking-through” activity designed to teach him more appropriate alternatives to his behavior.

- **Contingency 2:** If Michael refuses to follow through with step 1, and he continues to verbally threaten, the principal or other designated authority will be contacted to remove Michael from the classroom. Michael will be placed in in-school suspension for the remainder of the day. A meeting with the principal, his special education teacher, and Michael will be held to discuss the incident following his completion of the in-school suspension.

- **Contingency 3:** In the event that Michael does become physically aggressive, nonviolent physical crisis intervention procedures will be used to prevent Michael from hurting himself or others. As soon as possible, Michael will be removed from the classroom. His parents will be contacted to inform them of the incident, and the IEP team will reconvene to evaluate the appropriateness of his behavior intervention plan.

- **Contingency 4:** In the event that Michael destroys property, a plan of restitution will be developed in collaboration with Michael and his parents.

- **Contingency 5:** In the event that Michael harms another person, law enforcement officials will be contacted to investigate the incident, as appropriate.

The disciplinary mandates included in the 1997 Amendments to the IDEA require that school personnel respond more proactively and positively to the misbehavior of students with disabilities, especially when the misbehavior is a manifestation of the disability. For example, one of the cardinal characteristics of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is impulsivity. Such impulsive behavior may place a student such as Michael at heightened risk for disciplinary actions such as suspension or expulsion. Using the hypothetical incident and the manifestation form provided in Table 5, try to determine whether Michael's behavior is a manifestation of his disability. You may even want to discuss this incident with your peers and complete the manifestation form together. A manifestation determination such as this is now legally required for any student with a disability whose misbehavior is related to his or her disability, when suspension or expulsion is being considered as a consequence for the misbehavior. If the IEP team determines that the misbehavior is a manifestation of the student's disability, normal disciplinary procedures (suspension or expulsion) used for students without disabilities cannot be applied. This mandate, a source of much controversy, appears to many to represent a "dual" system of discipline in the schools and has resulted in considerable controversy among educators.
Critical Incident: Michael's bus driver, Mr. Etheridge, has repeatedly complained about Michael's aggressive and acting-out behavior on the bus. Because of his special education status, the principal, Ms. Van Hausen, has been reluctant to intervene very much. Ms. Van Hausen believes that there is little that can be done, given the many legal issues involved in disciplining a student with disabilities. In fact, Michael has already been suspended twice this year (5 days each time) for fighting, and she is aware of the 10-day rule on suspensions for students with disabilities.

Yesterday evening, Michael teased 9-year-old Justin repeatedly about his clothes. That is, Michael made fun of Justin's hand-me-downs and was cruel and relentless in his teasing. Things quickly worsened, and the two boys engaged in a heated argument. When Justin left to get off the bus, Michael tripped Justin, causing him to hit his head on the back of the seat. Justin had to be taken to the emergency room, where he was found to have suffered a mild concussion.

Needless to say, Mr. Etheridge is extremely upset and angered by Michael's behavior. He is insisting that the principal take immediate action to ensure that Michael suffers the consequences of his actions. The principal, upset and concerned as well, summons Michael's special education teacher and the school counselor. Both agree that the IEP team must conduct a manifestation determination.

Critical Questions to Be Answered During a Manifestation Determination

When conducting a manifestation determination, the IEP team must consider all relevant information, including evaluation and diagnostic results, the student's IEP, and placement. According to Hartwig and Ruesch (2000), four critical questions must be answered during the manifestation determination:

1. At the time of the incident, did the student have a disability?
2. In relation to the behavior subject to disciplinary action, are the student's IEP and placement appropriate?
3. Did the disability impair the student's capacity to understand the impact and consequences of the behavior subject to disciplinary action?
4. Did the disability impair the student's capacity to control the behavior subject to disciplinary action?

Reference