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## FBA: A Different Approach to Off-Task Behavior

One of the most common reasons for referral to school support personnel is “off-task” behavior — students who are inattentive, distractible and/or fail to complete assignments. Often, efforts to change such behaviors focus on consequences — rewards, loss of privileges, etc. However, such efforts frequently have limited success.

Research regarding *Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA)* has greatly advanced our understanding of how to change problem behaviors in the classroom. FBA procedures, unlike traditional approaches to behavioral assessment, focus on the environmental “*triggers*” rather than the nature (“*topography*”) of problem behaviors as a basis for the selection of treatment strategies. The emergence of FBA has provided educators with a set of procedures to identify the *function* (purpose) of the problem behavior (e.g., escape motivated or attention-seeking) by examining events related to its occurrence. This information can then be used to develop a positive behavioral intervention plan that directly addresses the identified function of the behavior.

For example, off-task behavior might serve the purpose of gaining adult or peer attention or access to more preferred activities, such as talking with peers or playing with materials; or the off-task behavior might serve the purpose of escaping or avoiding undesirable activities such as writing or reading. Off-task behaviors may also serve more internal functions as might be the case for students with a neuro-behavioral disorder such as Tourette’s Syndrome or Attention Deficit Disorder. And frequently, inappropriate behaviors will serve multiple functions, complicating assessment and intervention efforts.

## Connecting Academic Difficulty to Off-Task Behavior

Many educators believe there is a collateral relationship between the difficulty level of academic tasks and off-task classroom behavior. In particular, some have suggested that FBA procedures focus on academic and social behaviors in the classroom setting, as the difficulty of academic materials may increase escape and/or avoidance responses. Recent research suggests that *Curriculum-Based Assessment (CBA)* procedures could be incorporated into a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) to identify precipitating (*antecedent*) events that lead to off-task classroom behaviors of students.

**What is CBA?** CBA is a direct measurement process that uses the student’s curriculum to determine current and ongoing performance. CBA is advantageous for conducting FBA in classrooms because it provides standardized procedures that are reliable and valid, requires short administration times, is sensitive to student growth over brief periods, uses the same academic materials that influence the problem behavior in the classroom, and can be used to determine student *performance levels* within the curriculum (e.g., *frustrational* versus *instructional* levels). These performance levels represent the functional relationship between a student’s academic skills and the curriculum materials: If the curriculum is too difficult relative to the student’s academic skill level, excessive performance demands are created, which in turn may result in higher rates of off-task classroom behaviors to escape from difficult academic activities.

Identifying performance levels help define the requirements of the task and most often are expressed by correct and incorrect student responses. There are three performance demands or

relationships between fluency and errors: a) *Mastery*, b) *Instructional* and c) *Frustrational*. Optimally, students are taught at their Instructional level. Once performance levels are determined, materials can be developed and administered to conduct a Functional Behavior Assessment within the context of actual classroom activities. These procedures provide educators with a systematic method to manipulate the difficulty of the curriculum in the classroom while simultaneously monitoring problem behaviors.

## Research Findings

A recent study at Arizona State University examined how CBA procedures can be used to identify the antecedent conditions that prompt off-task behaviors in general education classrooms. For each student, we identified a functional relationship between frustrational and instructional level academic activities and off-task classroom behaviors. Further we found a relationship between the difficulty of the curriculum and off-task classroom behaviors. When given curriculum materials that were too difficult relative to the students' skill level, the percentage of off-task classroom behaviors increased. Conversely, fewer off-task classroom behaviors were observed when students were working on instructional level academic activities. These data indicate the need to go beyond assessing off-task classroom behaviors in isolation but, rather, to consider the influence of academic variables on these behaviors within the classroom settings.

## Steps for Conducting an FBA With CBA

Specific procedures for conducting FBA are available from many sources, including the materials noted below. In most school districts, FBA procedures are conducted by school psychologists, social workers, counselors and special education teachers, ideally using a team approach to collecting the information. Information is collected using a variety of methods, including direct observation, interviews with staff, parents and students, and through rating scales. Adding components of CBA to the FBA provides data to connect academic demands and behavioral outcomes. Two phases of the FBA/CBA include the Description Analysis and Functional Analysis, briefly described here.

### **Phase I: Descriptive Analysis** (see Table 1):

1. A problem identification interview to find out:
  - Operational definition of the problem (what is "off task?")
  - Context of the problem (when does it occur?)
  - Antecedents and consequences (what happens before and after?)
  - Curriculum and instructional sequence
  - Student's current level of performance
2. Direct observations to conduct an "ABC Analysis"
  - Record **A**ntecedents to behavior in academic versus nonacademic activities
  - Record the amount of **B**ehavior (such as percent off-task)
  - Record **C**onsequences of behavior (such as escape work, teacher attention, peer attention or other)
3. Administer CBA measures to determine instructional and frustrational performance levels (brief academic tests derived from the curriculum used)
4. Formulate *hypotheses* about the function of off-task behavior: a) attention, b) escape/avoidance, c) multiple functions or d) intrinsic/internal.

**Phase II: Functional Analysis** (see Table 1): School personnel experiment with different instructional conditions and collect data about any concurrent changes in the student's off-task behavior, in order to determine the conditions that prompt optimal behavior change. These steps include:

1. Record antecedents to behavior under different conditions: Instructional versus frustrational academic tasks.
2. Record the amount of off-task behavior observed under each condition.
3. Record consequences of behavior (escape, teacher attention, peer attention or other) under each condition.
4. Compare behavioral outcomes under different academic demands to identify most effective intervention strategies.

## Summary and Conclusion

There are many reasons for off-task behavior in classrooms. However, interventions that only consider changes in consequences (such as rewards or loss of privileges) may be unsuccessful because they ignore the conditions that lead to off-task behavior. Therefore it is important to con-

Table 1. Sample data collection form for descriptive analysis phase.

Intervals	Antecedent		Off-task behavior		Consequence		
	Academic	Nonacademic			Escape	Peer Attention	Teacher Attention
1							
2							
3							
4							
5							
6							
7							
8							
9							
10							

Table 2. Sample of data collection sheet for functional analysis phase.

Intervals	Antecedents			Off-task behavior	Consequences		
	Instructional	Frustrational	Non Academic		Escape	Peer Attention	Teacher Attention
1							
2							
3							
4							
5							
6							
7							
8							
9							
10							

sider academic difficulty when assessing and designing interventions for off-task behaviors. Curriculum Based Assessment (CBA) can be used within a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) to a) simultaneously examine academic and behavior problems, b) determine instructional and frustrational level curriculum materials, c) systematically change academic demands (antecedent conditions) related to off-task behaviors, and d) determine accompanying effects on students' off-task behaviors. FBA with CBA also offers a comprehensive set of measurement procedures that can be used throughout the assessment and intervention process to remediate students' off-task classroom behavior in both general and special education classrooms.

## Resources

- Nelson, J.R., Roberts, M., & Smith, D. J. (1998). *Conducting functional behavioral assessments in school settings: A practical guide*. Denver, CO: Sopris West.
- Roberts, M. L. Marshall, J., Nelson, J. R., & Albers, C. (in press). Curriculum-Based Assessment procedures embedded within Functional Behavioral Assessments: Identifying Escape-Motivated Behaviors in a general education classroom. *School Psychology Review*.
- Lee, Y., Sugai, G., Horner, R. (1999). Using an instructional intervention to reduce problem and off-task behaviors. *Journal of Positive Intervention*, 1, 195–204.

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