

Why Consider a Functional Behavioral Assessment?

When a child's behavior gets in the way of learning, it can be stressful for both families and schools. However, behavior is a form of communication. A Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) helps the school team understand your child's behavior and find ways to support them using tools that focus on their strengths.

If the student has an **Individualized Education Program (IEP)** under the **Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)**, there are specific times (including every IEP meeting) when a discussion must be held regarding whether behavior interferes with the student's learning and how it should be addressed. FBAs are not limited to students with IEPs.

What Is a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA)?

A Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) is a team-based process used to understand the reason behind a child's challenging behavior, what the child may be trying to get or avoid. The goal is to identify what triggers the behavior, what maintains it, and what the student might be trying to communicate through their actions.

An FBA helps answer questions like:

- What is the specific behavior we're concerned about?
- When, where, and with whom does the behavior happen?
- What happens right before (antecedents) and after (consequences) the behavior?
- What does the student gain or avoid through the behavior?

Behavior Has a Function

Every behavior serves a purpose. A student might act out to avoid a difficult task, get attention, or meet a sensory need. Identifying the function is key to developing strategies that truly help. Common behavior functions include:

- To escape or avoid something (e.g., a child may throw a pencil to avoid doing math)
- To get something (e.g., a child may yell to get attention from their teacher)
- To meet a sensory need (e.g., a child may put their head down to avoid classroom stimulation or walk around their desk to satisfy a movement need)

When Should an FBA Be Conducted?

In Virginia, an FBA may be conducted when:

- A student's behavior is interfering with their learning or the learning of others
- Behavior concerns are ongoing despite interventions
- The school is considering disciplinary action (especially if the student has a disability)
- A Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) is being developed or reviewed

An FBA should not be delayed due to discipline procedures. If a student with a disability faces suspension of more than 10 days, an FBA must be considered.

Steps in the FBA Process

FBA's are collaborative and data-driven. They are designed to promote prosocial skills and reduce exclusion. Here are the basic steps:

1. **Define the Behavior:** Clearly describe the behavior in observable terms (e.g., "throws objects when asked to do math worksheets" vs. "acts out").
2. **Gather Sufficient Data:**
 - Direct observations
 - ABC data (Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence—what happens before, during, and after)
 - Interviews with teachers, family members, and the student
 - Review of existing data (IEP, discipline referrals, grades, etc.)
3. **Identify Patterns:**
 - Look for triggers, settings, and other environmental factors, times of day, and people involved
 - Analyze what consequences may be reinforcing the behavior (e.g., if the child wants to escape doing math work and is removed from the classroom when he screams, that is a consequence that reinforces his desire to escape, so he will likely repeat it).
4. **Form a Hypothesis:**
 - Summarize why the behavior is happening (e.g., "When asked to write, the student tears papers to avoid the task.")
5. **Develop Recommendations:**
 - Suggest environmental changes, skill-building, and supports to address the behavior and develop more prosocial (appropriate) behavior. Rather than develop replacement behavior, the goal is to make the interfering behavior inefficient, ineffective, and irrelevant (i.e., the student can have their needs met without resorting to the interfering behavior).

Who Conducts the FBA?

An FBA is conducted by a team of professionals that may include:

- School psychologist or behavioral specialist
- Special education teacher
- General education teacher
- Administrator
- Other relevant staff (e.g., counselor, therapist)

Parents and students are essential members of the FBA team who can provide insights about behaviors at home, triggers, and what strategies have or haven't worked in the past. Parents know their child best and are an important part of the team.

What Should Parents Look For in an FBA?

A high-quality FBA should:

- Be based on objective, observed data

Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA)

A Resource Document for Parents



- Involve input from multiple people over multiple periods of time
- Result in a clear hypothesis about the behavior function
- Lead to actionable recommendations that will support the student's strengths
- Include suggestions for a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) if needed

What if I Disagree with the School's Actions?

If you request an FBA and the school does not want to conduct it, they must provide you with **Prior Written Notice (PWN)** explaining:

- Why they are refusing the request
- What information they used to make the decision
- Other options they considered and why those were rejected

If the school conducts the FBA but you disagree with it, you can ask for an **Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE)** at the school's expense. You have to do this within 1 year of the FBA having been conducted. If the school division does not want to fund the IEE, they would have to take you to a due process hearing to provide evidence that their evaluation is correct.

How Can I Request an FBA?

If you believe your child needs an FBA, submit the request in writing to the school principal or your child's IEP case manager. PEATC has a [Requesting an FBA-BIP](#) template letter that you can modify.

Final Thoughts

FBAs are not about labeling or blaming. They are about understanding your child and helping the team respond with compassion and evidence-based strategies. When done well, FBAs lead to better support for your child and more positive experiences at school.

Additional Resources

[CEBIS: Effective Behavior Support Across Virginia](#)

[What is an FBA in Special Education? Is it part of an IEP?](#)

[Functional Behavior Assessments and Behavior Intervention Plans: Guidelines for Effective Development and Implementation-VDOE- March 2025](#)

[Functional Assessment: What it is and How it Works](#)

[Independent-Educational-Evaluation-IEE.pdf](#)

[Regulations Governing Special Education Programs for Students with Disabilities in Virginia](#)



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