



FROM CHAOS TO CALM

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Collecting Data on Behavior in the Classroom for Improved Student Outcomes

Understanding and effectively managing student behavior is essential to promoting a positive and productive learning environment. One of the most powerful tools educators and special education professionals have at their disposal is data collection. Often, educators can get overwhelmed with which data to take and how to take it. However, by identifying, operationalizing, and systematically tracking and analyzing behavioral data, educators can identify patterns, understand the underlying causes of behaviors, and implement interventions that support student growth.

Behavioral Goals in an IEP

The IEP outlines specific educational goals tailored to the unique needs of each student, including goals related to behavior. Often an IEP team can support students by addressing a skill deficit related to behavior through an IEP goal. This can be the least restrictive option and can often be the most efficient when dealing with a skill deficit. Collecting data on these behavioral goals is essential for determining whether a student is making progress and whether interventions need adjustment.

Setting Behavioral Goals

Behavioral goals in an IEP should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART). These goals typically focus on improving or modifying a student's social, emotional, or behavioral skills to ensure better engagement in the classroom and successful interaction with peers and adults.

For example, a behavioral goal for a student with autism might be:

- **Goal:** "The student will independently raise their hand to ask or answer a question in 4 out of 5 opportunities during group instruction for 8 consecutive weeks."
- **Measurement:** The student's ability to raise their hand independently without prompting from the teacher.

Other common skill areas might include asking for help, waiting for reinforcement, resolving conflict, managing proximity, using tools for self-regulation, and applying strategies for self-management. The key to setting behavioral goals is identifying the skill and how you will measure whether that skill is developing or not. It is helpful to understand the baseline of the skill performance, the function of the problem behavior, and what is reinforcing to the student when you are identifying the replacement behavior



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Collecting Data on Behavioral Goals

To collect data on a student's behavioral goals, educators need consistent and objective methods to track the student's progress. It is also incredibly helpful to “operationalize” or define exactly what behavior is being tracked prior to data collection. If a team is tracking a specific behavior across a student's day and across settings, it is imperative that everyone be on the same page with what the behavior looks like. Once the team that is working to collect the data has defined the behavior, they should identify the method that will be used. This method and the tools used for data collection should be consistent across team members. Taking the time in the beginning to analyze and “operationalize” the behavior can save educators from finding themselves overwhelmed by the task and from collecting data that does not yield relevant information for decisions.

These methods can include:

1. **Frequency Recording:** Counting how many times a target behavior occurs within a specific period (e.g., raising a hand). This method is effective for behaviors that occur frequently, such as talking out of turn or leaving the seat. This can be a simple tally mark or moving paperclips from one pocket to another.
2. **Duration Recording:** Measuring how long a specific behavior lasts, such as a student's ability to remain seated. This method is useful for behaviors that may not occur as frequently but have significant duration.
3. **Interval Recording:** Dividing the observation period into equal intervals and recording whether the behavior occurred during each interval (e.g., 10-minute intervals). This method is beneficial when tracking behavior over a longer period of time.
4. **Rate of Behavior:** This combines frequency and time to measure how often a behavior occurs per unit of time. For example, the number of times a student asks questions per 10 minutes during a lesson.

Data collected in this way can be analyzed to determine whether the student is meeting the behavioral goal, whether the goal needs to be modified, or if further interventions are required. [Here](#) is a link to a set of data collection tools for each method.

Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA)

Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) is a comprehensive and systematic process used to identify the underlying causes of a student's challenging behavior. Rather than focusing solely on the behavior itself, the FBA seeks to understand why the behavior occurs and the environmental factors



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that may contribute to it. When a team conducts a functional assessment of behavior, they are able to collect data from multiple sources to help identify patterns across a student's day. This allows for the development of interventions that address the root cause of the behavior, increasing the chances of success.

Steps of a Functional Behavior Assessment

- 1. Identifying the Behavior:** The first step is to “operationalize” or clearly define the specific behavior of concern in observable and measurable terms. For example, "out-of-seat behavior" could refer to a student getting up without permission and moving around the classroom. It is important for a team to discuss what the behavior looks like and to keep the description in observable and measurable terms. If the behavior is defined as “being disrespectful” that could mean very different things for different people across that student's day. It is neither observable nor measurable. Instead, as a team pull out the specifics. That might be rolling of eyes, sighing heavily, cursing, talking loudly over other students or teachers, refusing to follow directions. Ultimately, the team should have worked to clearly define the behavior of concern in measurable and observable terms that allow for consistency in data collection.
- 2. Gathering Information:** Information is collected through multiple sources, such as:
 - **Direct observations** of the student's behavior in different settings. Making sure to use consistent methods or tools. If conducting an FBA, the team needs to obtain written consent from the guardian prior to collecting assessment data.
 - **Interviews** with teachers, parents, and other staff who interact with the student. The NMPED Technical Manual on Addressing Behavior has interview forms.
 - **Review of past records**, such as previous IEPs, behavioral reports, and incident logs.
- 3. Identifying Antecedents and Consequences:** The assessment looks at the events that occur before and after the behavior (the antecedents and consequences). Understanding these patterns helps identify what triggers the behavior and what may be reinforcing it.
 - **Antecedents:** What happens immediately before the behavior? For instance, is the behavior occurring when a particular task is presented, or when a peer interacts with the student?
 - **Consequences:** What happens immediately after the behavior? Is the behavior maintained because it results in avoidance of a task, access to a preferred item, or attention from peers or adults?



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4. **Hypothesis Development:** Based on the information gathered, the team forms a hypothesis about the function of the problem behavior. The function refers to the reason the behavior occurs, the why, the need or want not being met and might include:
 - **Escape/Avoidance:** The student engages in the behavior to avoid a task, situation, or person.
 - **Attention:** The student engages in the behavior to gain attention from others.
 - **Access/Obtain Tangibles:** The behavior may occur to gain access to something the student wants, such as a toy or food.
 - **Sensory Stimulation:** The behavior may serve a sensory need, such as self-soothing or seeking sensory input.
5. **Developing an Intervention Plan:** Once the function of the behavior is identified, an intervention plan is developed. The intervention should address the underlying cause of the behavior. For example, if the behavior is a means of escape, interventions might include teaching the student alternative ways to request breaks or providing additional support during difficult tasks.

Collecting Data During the FBA Process

Data collection during the FBA process involves direct observation and recording of the student's behavior, antecedents, and consequences. Tools used in this process include:

- **ABC Data (Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence):** This method involves documenting the antecedents, the behavior, and the consequences each time the behavior occurs. The goal is to detect patterns and determine the function of the behavior. An easy way to gather ABC data with multiple members is to use an electronic form.
 - [ABC Data Collection Google Form Elementary](#)
 - [ABC Data Collection Google Form Secondary](#)
 - [Editable ABC Data Collection Google Sheets](#)
- **Scatterplots:** A scatterplot is a type of data collection tool where the time and specific occurrences of a behavior are charted. This can help identify the time of day or specific conditions under which the behavior occurs most often.
- **Behavior Rating Scales:** These scales, completed by teachers, parents, or other staff, help assess the intensity and frequency of behaviors in various settings.



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The data gathered is used to adjust interventions as necessary, ensuring that the student's needs are being met effectively.

Integrating Data for Effective Behavior Management

Both behavioral goals within an IEP and Functional Behavior Assessments provide valuable insights into a student's behavior. Data collected through these methods can be used to:

- Monitor progress toward specific goals.
- Adjust interventions to maximize effectiveness.
- Provide evidence-based recommendations for further supports.
- Foster communication between educators, parents, and other professionals.

A collaborative approach, where behavior data from multiple sources is integrated and shared, ensures a holistic understanding of the student's needs and supports the development of targeted interventions that improve the student's success in the classroom.

By consistently collecting and analyzing data on behavior, educators and special education teams can create a more supportive and effective learning environment, leading to better outcomes for students.