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Beyond Trivial: Functional Behavioral Assessment and Student Support Plans Reasonably Calculated to Enable the Child to Receive Educational Benefits

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Introduction

Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District, March, 2017, U.S. Supreme Court, raises standards for documented educational benefits derived from special education services. IEP goals and resulting data must be "reasonably calculated to enable the child to make progress appropriate in light of his circumstances." Stakes are higher as courts and parents expect "[school] authorities to be able to offer a cogent and responsive explanation for their decisions." Adding to these challenges, the Peter P. et al vs Compton Unified School District of California ruling in 2015 legitimized educational concerns to learning caused by trauma, suggesting trauma may result in learning disabilities and must be treated as such (Larson, 2017). Documented growth with respect to social, emotional, and behavioral goals can be difficult to achieve. As a result, effective functional behavioral assessment (FBA) and behavioral intervention plans (BIPs) become more critical than ever before.

FBAs and BIPs are part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 1997. FBAs are assumed to be standard practice when determining reasons for inappropriate behaviors and are required in circumstances involving long-term suspension or expulsion of students considered to have a disability. The process of determining the function of the behavior being studied, a critical component of the FBA, is often overlooked or limited to those conditions or traits educators feel comfortable examining (Aldridge, Harrison, Harrison, & Blanchat, 2014). Unfortunately, contributions from the rapidly expanding field of neuroscience are not yet systemically considered. Specifically, effects of trauma and toxic stress are often excluded from review when determining function of behavior. The effects of trauma include not only physical changes in brain architecture, but also dynamic processing alterations within the brain (DeBellis, 2001; Delima & Vimpani, 2011; Perry & Pollard, 1998; Perry, Pollard, Blakely, Baker, & Vigilante, 1995). With mounting evidence of the disrupted development of key neural networks following developmental adversity, the need to create developmentally sensitive and biologically informed assessments becomes more apparent. And yet, as indicated in Crimmins, Farrell, Smith & Bailey (2007), it is not unusual for a BIP derived from an FBA to lack logical connection to identified behavior and/or theorized function of that behavior (Ingram, Lewis- Palmer, & Sugai, 2005; Scott & Caron, 2005; VanAcker, Boreson, Gable, & Potterton, 2005*)*. Prior to Endrew F. v. Douglas County (2015), Court standards required student benefit from specialized instruction to be "merely more than de minimus

(trivial)." Endrew F. v. Douglas County raises the bar; data flowing from irrelevant FBAs and ineffective BIPs will not meet current Court standards.

A streamlined, integrated approach to functional behavioral assessment and student support planning is proposed. Integral to the FBA process is an examination of setting conditions (school, community, and home) that contribute to an understanding of what has happened (or is happening) to the student (Cole, O'Brien, Gadd, Ristuccia, Wallace & Gregory, 2013). Student support team members then hypothesize function of behavior, working from the premise that traditional functions usually considered (avoidance, escape, attention, control) are replaced by research based, updated factors to include: biological regulation, social connectedness, emotional regulation, avoidance of curriculum and/or instruction, communication skills, and cultural/environmental skills.

Once a working hypothesis is developed, student support team members consider those supports essential to student success, devise ways to provide those supports, and establish an on-going data management system. When selecting necessary supports, it must be recognized that partnerships with community mental health service providers becomes essential. When dealing with serious trauma, school personnel alone will not have capacity necessary to meet student needs. The term "behavioral intervention plan" is replaced by "student support plan" thus shifting the focus from traditional notions of *intervening to fix the child* and moving toward adult accountability for *provision of supports necessary for student success.* Review of established and often ineffective practices, research-based justification for revised approaches, and sample functional behavioral assessment and student support plan (SSP) documents are presented (Appendix A). These documents are supplemented with a streamlined user's guide designed to provide support as local teams redesign their FBA and BIP/SSP processes (Appendix B).

Review of Ineffective Practices

Traditional functions of behavior considered while conducting functional behavioral analysis (FBA)

Functional behavioral analysis (FBA) seeks to answer the question: Why is the student doing what she is doing? Once the "why" is established, interventions are designed with the intent to replace inappropriate conduct with socially acceptable behaviors. To determine purpose of behavior, teams often consider the four functions of avoidance, escape, attention, and control. These four functions are frequently mentioned in FBA literature without reference to a specific source. Closely associated, Dreikurs' work involving the four mistaken goals of attention, power, revenge, and inadequacy assert that students choose behaviors necessary to enhance their sense of belonging – one of Maslow's needs put forth in his famous hierarchy (Dreikurs, Brunwald, & Pepper, 1998).

However traditional functions were determined, the end result is often an attempt to connect supports to functions that do not fully explain why the student does what she does. Compounding difficulties, this FBA perspective tends to presuppose that the child has neural structures necessary to make behavioral shifts. Often with traumatized children, this is not the case. Failure to consider neurobiological implications, along with restricted perspective that comes with over-reliance upon traditional functions is a fundamental flaw in the functional behavioral assessment process (Aldridge et al, 2014).

Other researchers hypothesize a different set of functions. For example, Crone & Horner (2003) cite research derived from vintage behaviorist thought dividing functions into two major categories: those associated with positive reinforcement to obtain something such as attention or an object and those associated with negative reinforcement to escape or avoid something undesirable (O'Neill & Stephenson, 2009). While the behavioral perspective can be useful, narrow focus upon temporal environmental events surrounding the behavior of interest can result in failure to assess critical setting conditions and other relevant factors, especially those with a neurological basis. This is a reoccurring product of our last 100 years of behaviorism. Contingency management might produce the desired behavior. However, if required neural structures are just not there, the student will not learn or behave in accordance with age appropriate standards.

Interventions derived from typical lists of mistaken goals and/or limited behaviorist perspective can be ineffective. The actual function is simply not on the list or can't be fully explained through examination of overt, immediate behaviors. This is especially true when children suffer extreme and/or sustained maltreatment. Traumatized children may behave differently because they see the world differently. Interventions derived from misguided function assumptions can lack logical connection to the behavior, result in ineffective supports and, worse yet, promote harmful practices to include punishment, isolation and/or grade level retention. Mohr, Martin, Olson, Pumariega& Branca (2009) reported similar concerns, observing that contingency management tools based on operant principles and social learning theory often do not hold up to empirical scrutiny and may even be counterproductive.

Emerging from behaviorist theory, the Antecedent/Behavior/Consequence (ABC) paradigm has its uses. However, over-emphasis of this paradigm can limit thinking to the point where effects of complex relationships, emotionality, trauma, personality, past and immediate experiences, and student confidence levels across settings might be entirely ignored. Failure to understand effects of relevant life circumstances leads to ineffective interventions. Flawed thinking, persistently evident in educators, further compounds difficulties when there is a belief that "consequence" is synonymous with "punishment."

The construct of supports, strategies or interventions based on an individual's label is another common practice in special education and in the mental health field. Lists of conditions or diagnoses, coupled with support strategies specific to each condition, serve to reinforce intervention processes based upon labels, as opposed to focusing upon individual student needs.

It is recommended that school personnel bypass the ABC paradigm entirely. Instead, develop a working hypothesis utilizing available information; allow support systems to evolve through continued data analysis and plan revision. This strategy of hypothesizing factors, implementing supports designed around those factors, and gathering data that supports or discredits the hypothesis is central to revising FBA processes.

Failure to consider neuroscience implications

Neuroscience developments offer new and highly impactful ways to understand human behavior. Sadly, most educational practices associated with functional behavioral analysis and behavioral interventions predate contributions from the field of neuroscience. Failure to consider neuroscience implications is especially problematic when trauma is suspected. Traumatic conditions occurring across school, community and home settings can profoundly shape behavior. Often, there is little or no awareness regarding connections between current behavior and past traumatic experiences; this compounds difficulties when determining function of behavior.

Neuroscience research tells us that "one size fits all" child management programs will not be effective (Perry and Dobson, 2013). Service providers must understand neurological processes that drive behavior and be flexible and creative when constructing a nurturing learning environment. This flexibility allows for the strong possibility that educators, therapists and the child herself may never fully understand complex reactions to past and present traumatic conditions underlying problematic behaviors. The FBA and support plan process must reflect both the complexity of the challenge and the need for tenacity when helping another person to make behavioral changes. These changes occur more rapidly when the focus of intervention is multiple, high quality relational interactions at school, home, and in the community (Perry, 2006) Change is a function of repeated stimulation of specific neural networks, meaning the networks that change are the ones stimulated most often. To accomplish this change, partnership with community mental health becomes essential; the type and extent of required mental health support is not available through the school.

Failure to consider setting conditions

Analysis of student behavioral patterns makes sense only after considering setting conditions in the school, community, and home that may develop and sustain inappropriate behavioral patterns. Rather than assume that problematic behavior is indicative of a problem within the child, first consider circumstances that could make the behavior look quite reasonable, given unreasonable or intolerable circumstances the child may be enduring in various domains. Because setting conditions often do not lend themselves to quick, easy, and comfortable scrutiny, they are often excluded from review.

Expanding upon work done by Bijou and Baer (1961), setting conditions are defined as stimulus-response interactions, which, because they have occurred, affect other stimulus-response relationships that follow. The term *setting condition,* as opposed to Bijou & Baer's term *setting event*, is used because the situations most impacting student behavior are often not isolated events, but are on-going conditions experienced regularly over an extended period of time (Aldridge, et al 2014; Umbreit, Ferro, Liaupsin, & Lane, 2007). Setting conditions involving trauma, adverse childhood experiences, on-going exposure to toxic stress, and other situations resulting in fear and anxiety can occur in school, community, and home environments. Neurological implications of such conditions can be extreme and must be considered; sometimes, any proposed intervention short of removal of the child from such conditions may be limited in effectiveness. Remember that any person, setting, or circumstance producing sensory stimuli resembling some aspect of original traumatic experiences could elicit the trauma reaction, whether the child is aware of it or not. This could be an abusive father or later a loud angry teacher.

As the FBA team reviews setting conditions, it is logical (but not traditional) to start with circumstances existing within the school, often under control of teachers and administrators. It makes no sense to attempt a "child fix" if the school environment subverts interventions and sustains poor student conduct. For example, if the student is responding to poor instruction, bully behavior, punitive practices, or a teacher who lacks the capacity or willingness to develop positive rapport, such conditions must be cleared up before the team can begin to understand what other factors might inform the "why" of the behavior. It also stands to reason that if school wide supports either do not exist or have not been fully implemented, an assumption that the problem is within the child is premature and possibly harmful. As stated by Sprick (2010), "only when universal supports are in place can we know that a student needs individualized intervention – don't call a neurosurgeon for everyone with a headache" (p. 258).

Relevant community and home setting conditions require sensitive interaction with family members. While school personnel can often influence such conditions, direct control is not possible. Related behavioral interventions are more effective when it is remembered that the student, like school personnel, is not usually in a position to control or improve community or home conditions. Recognize that students dealing with community/home setting conditions often take on adult level worries. (Ex: concerns about unsafe situations, lack of food, inadequate care for younger siblings, need for heat, water, and electricity.) Effective supports honor the validity of the student's concerns, along with his role within the family- a role that may extend well beyond stereotypical notions of childhood.

Failure to plan for situations involving severe behavior

Finally, traditional behavioral intervention plans focus on prevention of inappropriate behaviors and development of socially acceptable conduct. Such a focus is certainly critical. However, it is equally critical to plan for extreme escalations in student behavior, when past behavior establishes patterns of aggression, highly disruptive conduct or development of situations that threaten basic safety standards. Once a student exhibits such behaviors, there must be a plan, should preventive supports fail, and adults need to guide the student through stages of escalation and de-escalation. The proposed FBA/Student Support Plan protocol (Appendix A) includes a section on behavior threshold analysis, specifically designed to plan for adult actions, should a student be engaged in a cycle of escalating and de-escalating where aggressive or potentially dangerous situations are occurring. When extreme aggression is a part of the situation, the student and his family will often benefit from a plan that includes collaboration with mental health services. Such collaboration increases the likelihood of success, facilitating efforts across school, community, and home.

Why Plans Fail: Summary of ineffective practices

Traditional behavioral intervention plans often fail for one of three reasons: 1) Supports embedded in the plan do not address actual function of the original behavior; 2) The plan is not implemented at all, partially implemented, or implemented for an insufficient period of time. (Crimmins, 2007). School personnel must understand that support must be ongoing; change will come very slowly as the optimal developmental period for such growth has passed. 3) Setting conditions continue to initiate or sustain inappropriate conduct. For example, if a student continues to experience violence at home, he is unlikely to improve in other settings. Moving past traditional, ineffective practices, school personnel can learn new ways of thinking about, designing, and implementing behavioral supports. Read on!

Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) and Student Support Plans (SSP): Recommended Practices

It is easy to complain about and tear up past practices. The real issue is: What do educators do instead? Recommended practices that follow are meant to be read in conjunction with Appendices A & B. Appendix A is a sample Functional Behavioral Assessment/Student Support Plan protocol designed to be downloaded for immediate use. Appendix B is the associated User's Guide, a concise guide to the FBA/SSP protocol for those practitioners too busy to read this article. So, take a peek at both appendices, right now, and get ready to design support plans that work.

From Behavioral Intervention Plan to Student Support Plan: A journey in belief and practice

A terminology change is proposed, from Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) to Student Support Plan (SSP). This change in language is both intentional and critical to understanding a fundamental shift in thinking with respect to FBA and plan development. Recommended practices are not about i*ntervening* to *fix* someone else's behavior. Instead, caring adults (the support team) work cooperatively to identify and *provide those supports necessary* for the student to be successful at school. Put another way, the team is invested in the student's growth, particularly with respect to development of student self-control, and especially as related to the student's capacity to engage in life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness while at school.

Here's something else you may have noticed after taking a quick peek at the FBA/SSP protocol; it is unabashedly short. This process is developed to reflect real life circumstances experienced by students, educators, and family members. It is typical for support plan development to be put on hold while the FBA process drones on for weeks, even months. Such delays make no sense; children with serious behavioral issues need supports RIGHT NOW! Once a student has demonstrated the need for a support plan, bring together the team of caring adults, including family and mental health personnel, as quickly as possible. This FBA/SSP process does not preclude use of more time-consuming interview techniques, assessment tools, etc. Just don't wait for the results. Go with what the team can put together in a cooperatively facilitated, highly focused meeting, less than two hours in length. Then determine the need for further information as the working hypothesis and plan are revised at each subsequent meeting.

Regular 'meet back' dates are essential. The team keeps meeting until goals are met. In situations where a student's needs are great and highly aggressive behaviors are a concern, meetings may need to occur weekly, at least for a while. It might be argued, "we" don't have time for all these meetings. Please consider: Student behaviors that are extreme in nature require substantial quantities of time and school resources. Plan, up front, for this time. Recognize that perhaps the greatest school attribute is capacity to cooperatively plan, learn, and quickly apply new learning. Staff capacity for patience and tenacity expands along with opportunity to understand that children with extreme behaviors are functioning well below expectations for their age level peers. Extreme developmental immaturity necessitates long-term provision of supports traditionally reserved for much younger children.

It is recognized that the term "behavioral intervention plan (BIP)" is enshrined in Federal law and many State level documents; sometimes a student support plan needs to be called a BIP. On a daily basis, however, it is critical to use language supportive of underlying beliefs and practices, so here is one final argument for language shift from behavior intervention plan (BIP) to student support plan (SSP). Think about this from a parental perspective. Is it particularly comforting that a bunch of educators plan to intervene to change your child's conduct? Or does it resonate more positively when caring school people join forces with you, the parent, to identify and provide those supports that are

necessary for your child to enjoy and engage in teaching and learning available to all children? Once language choices are considered from the perspective of the student and family, change is sometimes necessary to convey explicit, child centered intentions while enhancing home/school relationships.

Schools and Community Mental Health Services: Meaningful, on-going partnership

School personnel are responsible for the academic life of the child. There is no justification for educators to abdicate responsibility and to declare that "this" child can't learn. However, the school alone cannot provide *all* resources needed to facilitate success for every child, especially when extreme behaviors are involved. Given what we now know about trauma and subsequent effects on the brain, it is essential that schools and mental health establishments merge resources. Together, these organzations expand capacity to support students and families. Partnerships are no longer an optional, cool, add-on; it is essential that collaboration across mental health and school agencies becomes a regular, on-going occurrence.

Forging of partnerships across bureaucracies is tricky business. Structural change (contracts, financial realities, written policy, board actions, etc.) need to emerge to both initiate and sustain this work. Even trickier is the need for relational opportunities to occur. Often, specific students and their families provide that relationship building focal point, bringing mental health providers together with teachers and school administrators. Such opportunities need to be recognized for what they are, a chance to help a particular child while developing relationships across professional agencies. Projects such as the Technical Assistance Support Network (TASN) School Mental Health Initiative, occurring in Kansas, are building new pathways for establishing and maintaining strong, on-going collaboration between schools and mental health agencies.

Factors vs. Functions

Now, it is time to rethink functions of behavior. Traditional functions of misbehavior (seeking avoidance, escape, attention, or control) were critiqued. To review, these functions are not sufficiently descriptive of the root cause of problematic behavior; they are simply too broad to lend themselves to identification of needed supports. In addition, traditional functions omit consideration of functional neurological maturity and organization. Next is a discussion of factors that pose reasonable explanations for why a student does what he does while providing a clear pathway to effective supports.

But first, a disclaimer: Any list of factors, functions, needs, mistaken goals, conditions, etc. embedded in an FBA process can limit the thinking of support team members. Attempts to discern reasons behind another person's behavior are difficult, complex, and subject to constant revision pending new understandings of setting conditions. Often,

there is no single factor that can fully explain the behavior in question, but instead the student is dealing with complex interaction of circumstances across settings and time. This is especially true when trauma is suspected.

To complicate things a bit more, reasons for a student's conduct may not become apparent until enough time has passed for development of a trust relationship with one or more members of the support team. In situations where student trust capacity is severely limited, where one or more critical adults lack relationship building skills, and/or where there is insufficient time in any one setting to develop the necessary trust relationship, the student's behavior may never be fully understood.

Determination of the function of misbehavior is truly a path fraught with peril. Yet the support team must have a logical starting point for connection of supports to student needs. The following six factors are worthy of consideration based upon research reasonably linking student experiences to inappropriate conduct seen in schools:
1) Biological Regulation; 2) Social Connectedness; 3) Emotional Regulation;
4) Avoidance of Curriculum and/or Instruction; 5) Communication Skills;
6) Cultural/Environmental Skills.

Following are descriptions of these six factors commonly related to troubling behaviors.

1. **Biological Regulation**: The human brain predicts and responds to environmental conditions. While doing so, the brain triggers release of chemicals, in appropriate amounts, to keep bodily systems running. Traumatic and surprise events influence this prediction/response process. Lack of biological regulation may result in behaviors considered to be inappropriate, even aggressive. Biological regulation issues result from a variety of conditions to include sleep deprivation, nutrition problems, and numerous mental health conditions (anxiety, depression, stress & fear responses, etc.). (Sapolsky, 2017)

   Depending upon underlying reasons for biological regulation issues, supports might include rest, food or medication. Movement is often important in helping a person maintain or regain balance. Likewise, a person may need access to a safe, quiet space. Regulatory supports may be needed over a very long period of time when the problem is one of overly active traumatic neuropathways.

2. **Social Connectedness**: Relationships are key to understanding social connectedness. Students lacking social connections usually experience few or no friendships. Development of trust relationships with adults is extremely difficult. In addition, students have few positive social encounters within an hour or day. Humans require social connectedness to feel safe, valued, and supported. Relationships with trusted adults enhances feelings of safety and calm when threats are perceived. Absence of positive relationships results in awkward, aggressive and inappropriate interactions and can impede student capacity to handle perceived threats. (Sapolsky, 2017)

It is critical to assist the student in resolving social connectedness challenges. Going beyond typical attention seeking remedies, necessary supports address the child's need to feel safe and accepted in a social community. Help the student to establish meaningful relationships with adults and peers. Create roles where that student is a valued and important member of the class and school.

3. **Emotional Regulation**: To understand this highly complex factor, consider the following: The student needs assistance in recognizing emotions - first in himself and later in others; guidance is required to develop appropriate responses to emotions; and finally, emotions are directly tied to biology. Capacity to recognize and respond to emotions is usually learned through infant and childhood experiences. This learning occurs within the context of a lived relationship with another person who genuinely cares for you; it cannot be faked. All emotions are learned first in a primal relationship and then used in relationships with others. Teachers will encounter children who do not have implicit memory regarding emotional regulation; such children will need help with this type of learning. (Barrett, 2017)

   Emotions include the full range of feelings: happiness, anger, sadness and fear. Emotional impact of daily schooling requires constant scrutiny and engineering. Classroom and school-wide practices can be structured to ease emotional burden, especially within the context of a preferred relationship with an adult. Common practices can also escalate inappropriate emotional responses. Such practices include some disciplinary procedures (punishment, for example), instructional techniques such as ability grouping, and high tolerance for insensitive social interactions. When school setting conditions contribute to emotional overload, adults in charge need to rethink and restructure.

   Emotional regulation issues can be addressed through a variety of curricula. "Teachable moments" also present opportunities to reflect upon emotional responses and to plan alternative behaviors for the next time. Such conceptually based approaches to teaching emotional regulation are effective when the student has sufficient developmental capacity for engagement. Children at an earlier developmental stage will need lived experiences with a caring adult, sensory opportunities to understand becoming calm, to feel secure, to deal with anger.

4. **Access to Curriculum and/or Instruction**: This factor is isolated for scrutiny due to extreme prevalence, especially when associated with academic success or failure. Avoidance of curriculum and/or instruction may be related to fear of failure or lack of pleasure connected with school work. Thus emotional regulation issues often occur in conjunction with avoidance challenges.

   Every student needs academic work that is rigorous, enjoyable, and provides opportunity for personal growth. Extensive research surrounding curriculum and instructional differentiation provides guidance regarding methods for engaging every learner. When work avoidance is considered to be the primary factor

behind inappropriate conduct, educators have a wonderful opportunity to utilize best instructional practices. Rethink what is being taught and/or how it is being taught. (Tomlinson, 2001)

5. **Communication Skills**: Communications skills allow people to interact verbally and nonverbally, to learn, to understand others, to be understood and to be valued. Put another way, communication skills are central to the human experience. When a person experiences communication challenges, even relatively minor ones, social consequences can be catastrophic. Unmet need for communication results in a variety of aberrant behavior such as aggression, and self-injurious behaviors to include substance abuse, stealing, lying, cheating, and property destruction. Individuals with communication issues often have difficulties initiating or sustaining healthy relationships. Communication issues can be interpreted as evidence of emotional disturbance, intellectual disability, or conduct disorder. Students dealing with communication challenges are often misunderstood, blamed for bad behavior, and punished accordingly.

   An alternative communication system, combined with a predictable, visual schedule are useful supports when helping a student to express his needs and wants. Speech and language pathologists can provide targeted, highly effective therapy. Speech/language therapy, especially when delivered in an emotionally safe environment with a trusted adult, can be foundational in assisting a student with behavioral changes. (Carr & Durand, 1985)

6. **Cultural Environmental Skills**: This factor encompasses social and character development skills, as part of clearly articulated school expectations that are taught and modeled. Positive Behavioral Intervention Systems (PBIS) and Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) are methods by which educators design and implement strategies to maximize positive skill acquisition.

   When it is hypothesized that cultural environmental issues are the root cause of poor behavior, it makes sense to first examine school and classroom environment. Look for misalignment with the child's culture or traditions. Consider problems associated with inconsistent expectations or situations where adults fail to model expectations. Adults then bring about environmental accommodations or changes, as needed. Once school environmental issues are eliminated as a possible factor in student misconduct, progress to individual, small group, or universal teaching of social skills and character development. As with emotional regulation, curricula abound for teaching social skills and character development. (Sprick, 2010)

Summary of Factors. As previously stated, experienced practitioners immediately notice potential inter-relatedness of factors. The student support team could combine two or more factors when considering why behaviors occur; the key is to agree upon that factor that best explains the behavior. Remember – factors built into this vision of functional

behavioral assessment are selected to provide reasonable entry points when designing supports. Data review leads to informed hypothesis that are ultimately proven or disproven depending upon student-based results. Assume that the team will not "get it right" the first time; data from a non-successful support might just be the ticket to designing the successful plan.

Factors and Supports Must Match

Once the team identifies likely answers to the question: "Why does this student behave like this?" they are ready to design supports. Identified factors are kept in mind and closely tied to all aspects of support design. Pulling together data from analysis of setting conditions, the team revisits the nature of the problematic behavior, identifies student strengths and resilience characteristics, and considers helpful aspects of school, community, and home circumstances. Supports must be logically connected to the working hypothesis regarding factors that best explain behavior. Replacement behaviors – acceptable behaviors that will function effectively for the student – need to be identified and agreed upon. It is imperative that necessary resources (adult time, materials, etc) be readily available and that realistic expectations are established and monitored for both the student and adults. Often, inclusion of mental health services is essential in developing an effective, comprehensive plan.

While it is curious to note the following frequently occurring problem, experienced educators will be familiar with this harmful phenomenon: One or more members of the support team will insist that the student *earns* supports identified (by this very team) as *necessary* for the student to meaningfully engage in schooling. Be patient with these team members. They are reflecting a deeply embedded notion that anything of a positive nature, and provided individually, must be earned. These team members might also be reflecting biases, again deeply embedded in traditional schooling, that the student must be *punished* for bad behaviors. Educators, like students, need time and safety to process new ideas. While advocating for the child, gently remind these team members that punishment has way too many negative side effects, and that the student has a right to supports necessary for ensuring access to and progress in the general education curriculum.

Supports must be continued until there are compelling data to demonstrate effectiveness or lack thereof. Too often, plans are continued despite glaring evidence of a mismatch between identified factors and supports. Equally ineffective is a plan initiated, never fully implemented, and then abandoned, usually with a team of educators insisting that "everything" has been tried. Utilizing the attached protocol (Appendix A), supports are tied directly to identified factors. Data points are articulated and recorded. Specific adults are identified as responsible for plan development and implementation. 'Meet back' dates are set with the strong implication that data WILL be available for review. In short, adult accountability is built into the process. The student and staff must be braced for a long journey; deeply entrenched behavioral patterns usually require extended periods of time for healing and growth. Adults, along with the student, require encouragement, critical feedback and access to supportive peers.

Schools are socially/culturally-constructed places. That is, schools are what we adults decide they will be. Adults determine methods by which students seek attention, become valued members of the school community, and acquire emotional intelligence, social skills, and character traits. Put another way, through careful attention to emotional impact of schooling, creation of quality of instructional opportunities, and attention to equity and promotion of human dignity, much inappropriate behavior can be eliminated. Add emerging literature regarding trauma sensitive schooling and the student support team comes away with a vast array of tools at their disposal for helping a student with tough behaviors while transforming over- all school environment.

Behavior Threshold Analysis

Finally, sometimes the student support team must plan for extreme behaviors. In situations where it is reasonably predictable that the student might attempt to harm himself or others, there must be a plan of action, previously determined, and known to all staff who work with this child. Once it is known that a child might elope to a busy street, throw staplers at people, stab himself with the scissors, or any other dangerous conduct, adults must be ready to take prompt, effective action. The Behavior Threshold Analysis portion of the FBA/SSP protocol (Appendix A) assists the team in establishing practices for when escalation is occurring.

Equally important is a plan to help the student to learn from the situation once instructional control is regained. Students who do not yet have the neurological development necessary for cognitive processing of the event may need to experience the process of becoming calm and secure, once again. When developmentally appropriate, instructional support can include discussion about what happened, how the student and adults might do things differently in the future and consequences (NOT punishment). Often times, consequences have naturally occurred (recess went on without her; school work still needs to be accomplished; other students were afraid, et.). It may not be necessary to add additional consequences, especially if the student has experienced trauma.

Summary

Functional behavioral assessment and effective behavioral support plans are critical in meeting new standards set forth in the U.S. Supreme Court decision Endrew F. v. Douglas County (2015). Likewise, the Compton case raises the stakes with respect to understanding long-term effects of trauma as related to learning problems in school. When factors explaining inappropriate behavior are identified, and setting conditions are analyzed, supports are more easily connected to the student's situation. The marriage of schooling and mental health is no longer optional; professionals from both fields must find new ways to collaborate with each other and with families. Furthermore, data regarding support plan effectiveness are an inherent part of the process, not an afterthought tied to practices that may be irrelevant to the student's needs.

Processes outlined here are not, however, for the weak at heart. Analysis of school setting conditions requires a willingness to assess adult behaviors and adult sponsored conditions *from the perspective of the student*. Tendencies toward creativity, flexibility, and willingness to depart from ineffective and harmful practices are necessary ingredients in school setting condition analysis. Consideration of the six factors embedded in this FBA process may lead to uncomfortable discussions regarding a student's real life needs and circumstances. Development of effective supports might mean movement beyond adult comfort levels and traditional practice. Schooling and mental health bureaucratic structures were not designed for collaboration and must be redesigned. Supports must be logically connected to the team's best guess regarding factors influencing behavior. Data generation, adult accountability and on-going plan modification are integral components of effective behavioral support.

Use of this functional behavioral assessment process can provoke feelings of insecurity and defensiveness across some practitioners. As with students, take proactive steps to preserve the dignity of teachers and administrators. Invite discussion and input in advance of any change in FBA protocol. Be aware that most individuals go through the "what does this mean for me" phase of change before they can move on to a more systemic level of thinking based upon what is best for students. Make time for this discussion; let the storm brew and blow. Then help educators to get down to the hard work of improving schooling practices.

Here's the really exciting news. When teams of committed educators find their way through authentic functional behavioral assessment and student support plan development, they learn, one student at a time, how to make the school better for many, sometimes all, students. Resulting systemic change disrupts standard practice; students and adults are challenged to replace old practices with new ideas and methods. This is, indeed, work worth doing.

Appendix A

Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) & Student Support Plan (SSP)

(Rev.7.17.19)

Date:
Student Name:
Present:

Note Taker:

Element 1: Identify resilience characteristics and strengths.

Element 2: Define problematic behavior.

Location *(Where does the behavior occur? Ex: locker room, first grade classroom, math class, lunch, before/after school areas)*

Rate of Behavior *(How often does the behavior occur? Ex: X number of times per minute, hour, day, week, or month, as appropriate)*

Percent of Time *(What percent of a particular hour or day is the child engaged in the behavior?)*

Intensity *(When the behavior occurs, how disruptive is the behavior to the school environment and/or student learning? Consider using a 1-10 scale to describe intensity; 1 being low intensity and 10 high intensity.)*

Element 3: Review setting conditions. *(Describe conditions in **school**, **community, and home** that could explain problematic behavior.)*

Element 4: Identify factor(s) related to function of behavior. (Develop a working hypothesis regarding why the student behaves as he/she does. Check the factor that best explains the behavior.)

___ Biological Regulation
____Social Connectedness
____Emotional Regulation
____Access to Curriculum/Instruction
____Communication Skills
____Cultural Environmental Skills

Element 5: Match support strategies to factors. (Identify support strategies that match hypothesized factors. Consider student/home strengths and resilience characteristics.)

Factor	Supports

Element 6: Identify replacement behavior. What do you want the child to do? Clarify family involvement.

Element 7: List resources needed to implement the plan. Be realistic.

Element 8: Adult accountability. Specify *person(s)* responsible for plan implementation.

Element 9: Specify data points and responsible adults.

Data Point	Person Responsible

Element 10: Set meet back date(s)/time.

Element 11: Behavior Threshold Analysis

(To be completed if the team needs a plan of action to support the student while her behavior is escalating, peaking, or deescalating.)

Describe indications that the student is escalating:

What are adults expected to do when escalation behaviors are noted?

Describe observable indications that the student has resumed gross control, self-control necessary to be safe with respect to both self and others.

Describe observable indications that the student has resumed instructional control, self-control necessary to de-brief and to learn from experiences.

Describe which adult(s) will engage in teaching interventions based upon the recent situation.

Time/Date for adult debriefing of incident:

Appendix B

User's Guide to Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) and Student Support Plan (SSP)

Element 1: Identify resilience characteristics and strengths.
Consider strengths stemming from family, cultural, community circumstances. Include attributes associated with resiliency - character traits, social skills, and resources that help a person to deal with tough times and challenging issues. Resiliency characteristics might include:

- Trust relationship with one or more people in the family or community.
- Trust relationship with one or more adults in the school.
- Social skills that enable the student to cooperate with others.
- Food security. (The student knows he will always have enough to eat.)
- Friendship with at least one student.
- The student feels safe at school.
- The student feels safe at home.
- The student feels safe in her community.
- Capacity to adapt social skills to immediate circumstances, switching between home, school, and community as needed.
- Optimistic, hopeful view of circumstances and future; believes things will get better.

Element 2: Define problematic behavior.

Specific descriptions include location, rate of behavior, percent of time, and intensity. In most situations where an FBA is initiated, data have already been gathered through referral to a school support team and/or implementation of general education interventions. To clearly define problematic behavior, educators access these data and, within a matter of a few minutes, come to agreement regarding a clear, concise description of behavior. In situations where referral for special education evaluation is considered and such data are not available, it could be that team members need to make sure general education interventions have been authentically identified and implemented. When support teams routinely run into problems with this beginning step, it could be that general education intervention protocols need to be reviewed and revised.

> Note: This FBA/SPP process is fully adaptable to general education intervention (GEI) processes. When used at the GEI level, teams sometimes need to develop a data driven culture as they work together to help students. It is critical to support educators as data management skills are developed, just as supports are provided to students who are learning new and (for them) difficult skills.

Element 3: Review setting conditions.
Consider setting conditions related to school, community, and home that could reasonably explain problematic behavior. Review school setting conditions first. *If school setting conditions are initiating or sustaining inappropriate conduct, change these conditions prior to development of a student support plan. Do not blame the student for conditions controlled by school personnel.*

The student may have experienced traumatic situations in school, community or home settings. If trauma is suspected, the following resources may be helpful in gathering additional information.

- Adverse Childhood Experience Checklist (https://acestoohigh.com/got-your-ace-score/)
- Child Report of Post-traumatic Symptoms (CROPS) - child symptom self-report (http://www.childtrauma.com/publications/assessment-instruments/)
- Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children (https://www.parinc.com/Products/Pkey/461)

Be sensitive regarding the use of trauma assessments and screeners. For further learning, see *Guidance for Trauma Screening in Schools* and the accompanying webinar. Best practice involves a trust relationship between the family member(s) and school staff when completing this checklist and when sharing resulting information.

Relevant community and home setting conditions require sensitive interaction with family members. Often, these conditions are beyond control of school personnel. Related behavioral supports are more effective when it is remembered that the child is also unable to control key setting conditions. Action plans may include these components:

- Collaboration with mental health providers might be necessary, especially if complex trauma is documented or suspected.
- Develop a long-term plan involving family and community to address underlying conditions.
- Affirm to the child that behaviors considered to be problematic at school might be very useful and appropriate in other situations.
- Teach social skills appropriate for school. Where it makes sense, emphasize that "code switching" is not only OK, but often a strong coping mechanism as the student travels through her daily circumstances in school, community, and at home.
- Students who experienced (or are experiencing) complex trauma may not yet have neural development necessary to process social/emotional supports in an age appropriate way. Communication with family and mental health staff might provide

insight regarding developmentally appropriate supports for a particular child.

- Recognize that students dealing with community or home setting conditions often take on adult level worries. (Ex: concerns about unsafe situations, lack of food, inadequate care for younger siblings, need for heat, water, and electricity.) Effective supports provide a way to productively address such issues while honoring the child's maturity and the realistic nature of these worries.

Element 4: Identify factor(s) related to function of behavior.
There is no magical list of factors that will account for all possible issues associated with student conduct. Start with what is known about the particular child, his/her circumstances, needs, personality characteristics, home situation, etc. Consider the following factors as research shows that one or more are often lurking behind problematic behaviors.

- Biological Regulation
- Social Connectedness
- Emotional Regulation
- Access to Curriculum/Instruction
- Communication Skills
- Cultural Environmental Skills

See document *Six Factors Related to Functions of Behavior* for an expanded explanation of each factor.

Element 5: Match support strategies to factors. Support strategies must match hypothesized factors influencing behavior. For example, if it is hypothesized that a student is irritable and angry because of inadequate sleep, try scheduling a nap time. Students are not required to earn supports identified as needs.

Element 6: Identify replacement behavior. Clearly defined replacement behaviors are essential in establishing goals and determining support plan success. It is not enough to eliminate or reduce undesirable behaviors. There must be clear agreement across adult team members regarding behavior considered to be acceptable.

Element 7: List resources needed to implement the plan.
Be proactive; make sure the student and school personnel have what is needed for success. Don't make promises you can't keep. When non-school agencies are involved, make sure to specify accurate timelines and resources, in accordance with that agency's capacity.

Element 8: Adult accountability.

Identify, by name, those adults responsible for plan implementation. It is critical that colleagues both expect each other to meet their responsibilities AND stand ready to provide assistance if something isn't getting done. Bottom line, healthy school culture is centered around student needs; adults are expected to get their work done and to communicate results with their team mates.

Element 9: Specify data points and responsible adults.
Specify *a specific person* responsible for ensuring that data are gathered and shared. Again, adult accountability is the key to support plan success. Consider a universal data system, one that can be applied across many students and school settings, to build consistency and reliability across school personnel. In most cases, establish a data system that directly involves the student. Each data point must be clearly identified and related to a support or skill area included in the plan. A clear, relevant feedback loop can be a powerful support.

Element 10: Set meet back date(s)/time.
Do this! Data analysis is critical; assume that the team will not be successful the first time. It is necessary to consider whether or not student conduct improves, modifying the plan as needed until success is achieved. Highly complex situations take time for resolution, one way or another. Be proactive in scheduling meet backs; it is much easier to cancel meetings as they become unnecessary. In situations where aggressive behavior is involved, the team may need to meet weekly, at first. If one or more team members can't attend every meeting, document the method by which that person will be kept apprised. Meet backs should be short; try to keep meeting length to less than thirty minutes. Utilize the meet back form to document decisions.

Element 11: Behavior Threshold Analysis
To be completed if the team needs a plan of action to support the student during the escalation/de-escalation process. It is essential that this analysis be completed if violent, or aggressive behavior is predicted.
Possible indicators that a student is escalating:

- change in voice tone
- student is vocalizing distress
- student attempts self-protection through withdrawal or aggression

Possible adult actions to be taken when escalation is noted:

- reduce lighting
- calm music
- reduce number of class mates present
- reduce/eliminate adult verbalizations
- back off, give student room
- limit number of adults present; request presence of most trusted adult
- notify parent (NOT as punishment, but to alert the parent that home support may be needed)

- use non-verbal signals (pre-taught and practiced) to remind student of safe spot options

Indications that student has regained gross control, self-control necessary to be safe:

- Normalized rate of breathing
- Relaxed body posture
- Requests for assistance (verbal and nonverbal)
- Facial expression indicates student is calm and/or tired
- Student refrains from dangerous or disruptive behaviors
- Calm tone of voice
- Indicates willingness, when prompted, to follow a simple instruction (Ex: I will stay in this seat/area.)

Indications that student has regained instructional control, self-control necessary to engage in learning:

- Is able to follow instructions
- Is able to return to an instructional setting
- Is able to complete school work

- Is able to accept comfort/sensory experiences necessary to regain a sense of safety and trust
- Engages in discussion about her feelings and actions
- Reflects upon the situation
- "Owns" his behaviors
- Wants to make things right
- Accepts consequences

Student follow-up might include discussion about what happened, how the student and adults might do things differently in the future, and consequences (NOT punishment) regarding the situation. Often times, consequences have naturally occurred (recess went on without him; school work still needs to be accomplished; other students were afraid, et.). IT IS NOT NECESSARY TO INVENT CONSEQUENCES, especially if the student has already experienced trauma. Often, the student WILL benefit from opportunities to "make things right." Such opportunities could include: apology, picking up the mess; thinking of ways to modify his plan to prevent future occurrences or helping other students or staff affected by the incident.

Students dealing with complex trauma may not yet have sufficient neural development necessary for cognitive processing of the incident. Follow-up may involve sensory experiences where the child feels comforted, supported, and safe. Student follow-up needs to be developmentally appropriate; supports may be more typical of interactions with much younger children.

Adult de-briefing is essential, especially in situations involving aggressive behavior, seclusion, or restraint. Establish a time and date, closely following the incident, where support team members discuss the situation, analyze data associated with the support plan, and agree upon plan changes, as necessary. In situations where escalations occur

with high frequency, it makes sense to pro-actively schedule de-briefings daily or weekly, as necessary. It is much easier to cancel a previously scheduled meeting than it is to call people together without prior notice.

A final word about adult de-briefing: Adults need positive, collegial support. De-briefings might include adult processing of emotions they've experienced, along with sharing of self-care techniques and ideas about how to provide mutual support. Donuts might be a good idea, or, OK, healthy snacks. The key is to plan for adult needs when situations might involve extreme stress.

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