What is a Functional Assessment?

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Introduction

The purpose of this resource is to help define and describe the use of functional assessments when working with individuals with developmental disabilities.

Sometimes individuals behave in a way that is a harmful to themselves or others. The concept 'behaviour of concern' means that an individual is displaying behaviour of such intensity, frequency or duration that the physical safety of individuals or others is likely to be placed in jeopardy. Furthermore, the consequences of the behaviour are likely to have serious impact on activities of daily living and/or quality of life.

> *We know what we are, but we know not what we may be*
> *William Shakespeare*

Planned behavioural procedures and/or planned restrictive procedures used by family and staff members often require a functional assessment. This resource has been designed to answer basic questions a front line staff, family member, or individual may have about the functional assessment process.

Approaches to Responding to Behaviours

There are many different ways to approach understanding a person's behaviour. Here are several examples:

Roberta has a lot of anxiety going to the dentist which results in unpredictable striking out.	Family/staff members ask a doctor to prescribe a medication to help Roberta manage her anxiety. This is a medical/biological/medical approach to addressing behaviour.
Quon is 45 years old and likes to go to movies that appeal to 16 year old girls.	Family/staff members encourage Quon to choose a movie that is age appropriate. This is a developmental approach to addressing behaviour.
Carlos has trouble at work and is often required to leave his work station because he disrupts others. Carlos does not have these behaviours at home, church, or in his art classes.	Family/staff members decide to investigate why he is having problems in one environment but not others. This is considered an ecological approach to addressing behaviour.
Anastasia recently moved into her new home. She has started hitting her new roommates.	Staff members are closely documenting what happens before and after she hits her roommates. This is using a behavioural approach to addressing behaviour.

As you can see from these examples, an individual's behaviour may be approached from different perspectives. Specifically, one person may view a person's challenging behaviour as a result of their disability, while the next person might determine that the environment where the person works is the cause of the person's challenging behaviour.

This also means that different theories have different strategies and/or behavioural interventions associated with them. For example, in one situation a doctor may decide medication can effectively address the person's anxiety about going to the dentist. In contrast, a behavioural consultant may decide that staff/family members modeling socially acceptable behaviours could help alleviate the individual's anxiety about a visit to the dentist.

Positive Behaviour Supports Approach

In addition to the approaches already discussed, there are other models that can provide insight into human behaviour.   Traditionally, the following two models are used when the individual's behaviour is worrying and is becoming a 'behaviour of concern.'

Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) is one approach that is frequently used to support individuals with complex and challenging behaviours. ABA involves using precise observation and measurement to help address socially relevant behaviours. This means that family/staff members are often required to take observe and record incidents in order to analyze them.

Over the past few years, the ABA approach was integrated with a person centered approach, resulting in the Positive Behaviour Supports approach. The defining feature of this approach is that behavioural interventions are expected to align closely with the individual's dreams and personal goals.

Functions of Behaviours

Again, it is important to remember that behaviours serve many different functions. Individuals may present with challenging behaviours for many reasons. It is helpful to look at the common functions that behaviours might serve. (Adapted from Wheeler & Richey, 2010).

Attention:	An individual is engaging in the problem behaviour for the purpose of gaining attention.
Escape:	An individual is engaging in the problem behaviour for the purpose of escaping a non-preferred activity, escape a non-preferred setting etc.
Sensory Stimulation:	The problem behaviour occurs with or without anyone watching and the individual does not need any other forms of stimulation.
Tangibles:	An individual is engaging in the problem behaviour for the purpose of obtaining a preferred item such as food, toys, or other items.

It is important to understand that very seldom is there one 'right' answer or only one approach to understanding human behaviour. That is why a qualified person (see pages 4-5) will gather a variety of information to help understand the individual and the environments they access.

Using this background information, the qualified person will try to identify the possible functions that the behaviour serves in a person's life. The qualified person will come up with a hypothesis and then use observation and documentation strategies to confirm if s/he is correct. If the ideas appear valid and reliable, the qualified person will then propose strategies and/or interventions to help the individuals increase their quality of life. This process is considered a functional assessment.

Functional Assessment as Part of a Process

As previously discussed, some individuals with disabilities have complex and challenging behaviours. These behaviours are likely preventing the individual from having a quality of life that they desire. The behaviours may also result in risk to the individual, others, and/or the environment. If this is the case, several processes are put into place.

Initially, a risk assessment will be completed on the individual. The risk assessment provides the 'big picture' perspective in regard to situations when an individual might become a danger to self, staff, others, or property. In situations where the individual may engage in violence, it is important to develop a risk management plan. The risk management plan will help identify ways to enhance the safety and protection of all people and perhaps property. As well, it would then become necessary to explore the possible need for a functional assessment to help identify the behaviours associated with the risk.

Risk Assessment

Crisis Intervention

Functional Assessment

Positive Behaviour Support Plan

In a functional assessment, the purpose of an individual's behaviours is explored by collecting data specific to the individual, their relationships and their environments. Using this information, the specialist is able to develop appropriate teaching and/or intervention strategies that are specific to the individual. A positive behaviour support plan is then developed from the results of the functional assessment to assist with formalizing, documenting, and monitoring the intervention strategies.
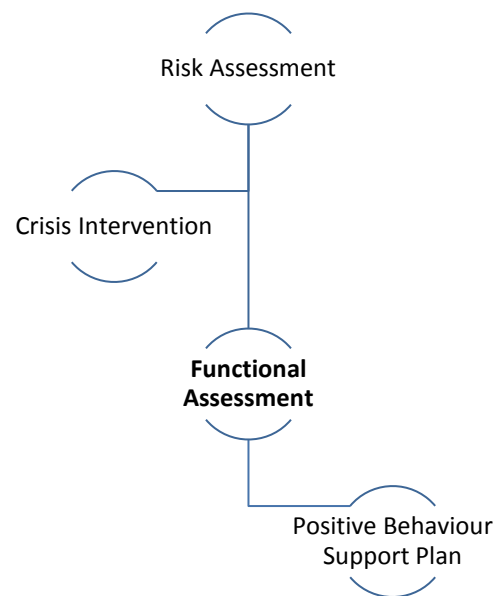
When to Perform a Functional Assessment

As discussed earlier, some individuals have 'behaviours of concern,' meaning that their behaviour may be considered harmful in some way. These behaviours are typically considered 'anticipated' (likely to occur) in that the person may have a history of the behaviour. However, the behaviour may increase, decrease, or change over time. As such, family/staff members may choose to seek professional help to identify prevention and intervention strategies when behaviours are interfering with an individual's safety and quality of life.
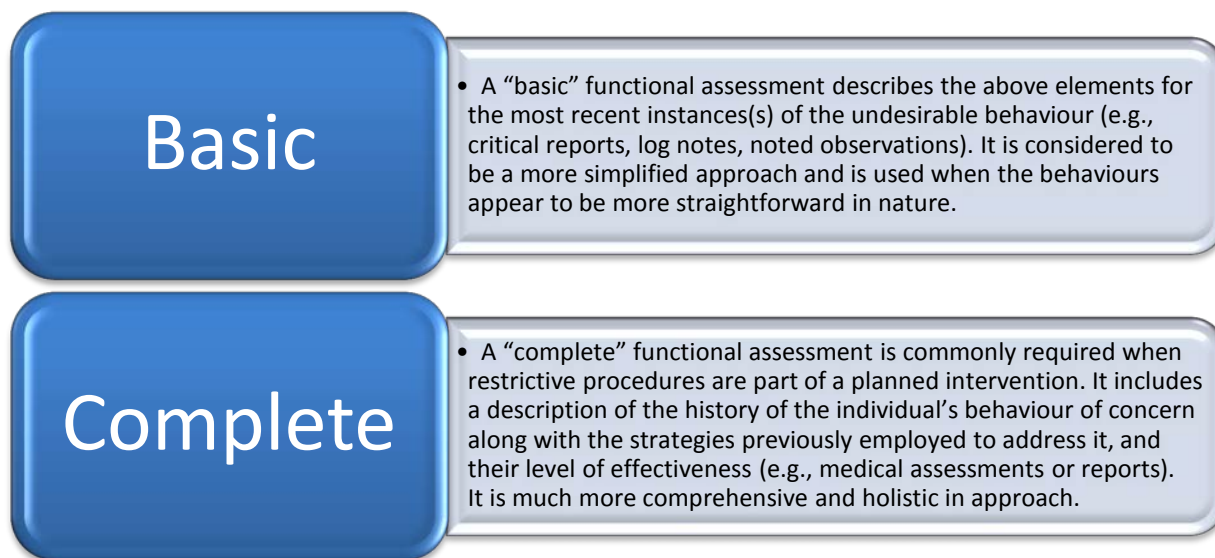
A functional assessment is the process of systematically identifying factors that predict and maintain "behaviours of concern." It produces three main outcomes:

- An operational definition of undesirable behaviour;
    - o (operational means a definition that is observable and measurable)

- A prediction of the times and situations when the undesirable behaviour will and will not occur; and

- A definition of the functions that the undesirable behaviour produces for the individual.

This information from this assessment is then used to identify teaching and intervention strategies to be used in a positive behaviour support plan.

Two Types of Functional Assessments

Basic	• A "basic" functional assessment describes the above elements for the most recent instances(s) of the undesirable behaviour (e.g., critical reports, log notes, noted observations). It is considered to be a more simplified approach and is used when the behaviours appear to be more straightforward in nature.
Complete	• A "complete" functional assessment is commonly required when restrictive procedures are part of a planned intervention. It includes a description of the history of the individual's behaviour of concern along with the strategies previously employed to address it, and their level of effectiveness (e.g., medical assessments or reports). It is much more comprehensive and holistic in approach.

Conducting a Functional Assessment

Generally, a trained professional (graduate level training in behaviour and/or psychology) is best suited to perform a complete functional assessment. A certain level of training, education, and experience is important as the professional is required to access information from multiple sources, analyze this information, and then make an assessment. Often, the information gathered may be complicated, use technical words (such as diagnostic labels), and may even be contradictory. The professional uses the information provided, their training/education, and past experience when formulating a report that is helpful for the individual and care providers/family.

Sometimes, the situation is more simplistic and straightforward. In these situations, the agency may have a trained specialist who will perform a basic assessment.

Alberta Council of Disability Services has defined Qualified Person with respect to behavioural supports as:

- A staff member, service provider, or caregiver who develops, implements, and/or reviews the use of planned positive procedures and/or restrictive procedures must be qualified to do so. A qualified person may be a psychologist with relevant training and experience in behavioural management, or a person with at least two years of relevant training that includes behavioural supports and a minimum of three years of practical experience in behavioural supports (including planned positive procedures and restrictive procedures).

- A qualified person would also be responsible for supervising interventions that use planned positive procedures and restrictive procedures.

- Note: a person with the above training and experience would also be limited in the kind of restrictive procedures they are allowed to approve, implement, and supervise. For instance, a psychologist could be consulted for anything involving psychotropic medications and for the supervision of individuals who require more complex behavioural procedures (e.g., aversive conditioning); however, a psychiatrist or physician would be required to prescribe any medications.

In addition to the academic credentials, training, and experience, it is also important to be aware of the professional's preferred theoretical framework. In most cases, a professional will incorporate more than one of the approaches (introduced earlier) in an effort to be as comprehensive as possible.

Remember, family and/or staff members as well as the qualified person may have different ways of making sense of an individual's behaviour. It is important to choose a professional that will listen to the perspective of the individual with the challenging behaviour along with family members and key service providers. Effective communication is the essence of a functional assessment.

Sources of Information

Functional assessment processes typical involve collecting and reviewing the following:

- Risk assessment

- Medical assessment that could include a physical exam, a psychiatric exam, or both

- Individuals' past history as it relates to the behaviour of concern

- Previous strategies employed to address the behaviour of concern

- Consultations with relevant professionals (e.g., physician, orthodontist, denturist, surgeon, psychiatrist, psychologist, behavioural specialist, speech language pathologist, occupational therapist, physiotherapist, dietician)

Other Types of Assessments

The following assessments may be done independently or may be part of a functional assessment. It depends on the individual, the presenting behaviour of concern, previous assessments, and the skills/qualifications of the person conducting the assessment.

- Environmental assessment
  - Tries to understand how the individuals feel about their various environments and programs, and how well-adapted the environments and programs are to the individuals

- Communication assessment
  - Examines how the individuals communicate, what they are trying to convey, and how well their caregivers can understand their method of communicating.

Data Collection Strategies

The professional completing the functional assessment may use different types of strategies for collection the data:

- Indirect observation
    - e.g., interviews with staff/family members, use of rating scales, etc.

- Direct observation
    - e.g., antecedent-behaviour-consequence [A-B-C] data recording, scatter plots, time sampling or frequency counts); and/or functional analysis (e.g., experimental manipulations, hypothesis testing, etc.

- Record review
    - e.g., reviewing monthly reports, incident reports, previous assessments and plans, etc.

Approaches to Functional Assessment

Given the uniqueness of human behaviour and the environments humans inhabit, it is difficult to create a standardized functional assessment tool. While there are some tools used in the classroom and/or in the medical profession, there are few formalized tools for individuals with developmental disabilities living in the community. Functional assessment interviews (FAI) and many different forms and interview questions to help guide the functional assessment process are available online. Here is one form and a site that may be helpful:

- Alberta Human Services Assessment Form
    - http://humanservices.alberta.ca/documents/PDD/pdd-central-functional-assessment-form.pdf

- Kansas Institute for Positive Behavioural Support
    - http://www.kipbs.org/new_kipbs/fsi/behavassess.html

Typically, the qualified person completing the assessment will use approaches/documents they have developed over time and that they can customize to fit the individual/situation.

Generally a complete functional assessment will include questions involving the following areas:

- History of the Individual
    - Documenting biographical information like age, gender, culture, health status, mental health history, etc.

- Current Lifestyle
    - Describing the individuals current living situation, relationships with others, typical daily routines, current emotional well being, etc.

- Strengths of the Individual
    - Ensuring that the person's strengths are identified and incorporated into the assessment as well as to assist with the identification of potential teaching and intervention strategies

- Communication Skills
    - Exploring the quality of communication when interacting with others

- Physiological (Health Conditions)
    - Identifying possible medical/health conditions that may contribute to and/or explain a behaviour

- Behaviours of Concern
    - Defining the actual behaviour of concern that is presenting by attempting to operationally define the behaviour (making it sure it is observable and measurable)
    - Explaining important aspects such as the frequency, duration, intensity, of the behaviours as well as what happens before/after a behaviour of concern occurs

- History of Behaviour of Concern
    - Investigating if there are other factors that may be related to the onset of the behaviour (e.g., new staff, change in schedules, change in eating)

- Baseline of the Behaviour of Concern
    - Observing, recording, summarizing and analyzing the data
    - Identifying patterns in relationship to intensity, duration, frequency, outcomes of the behaviour, etc.

Key Things to Remember

- PERSON CENTERED is the desired foundational philosophy when completing a functional assessment. If the behaviour of concern is preventing the person from achieving a quality of life they desire, then it is appropriate to pursue planning around the behaviour.

- MEDICAL CAUSES underlying a complex and challenging behaviour must be ruled out before trying to determine the function of the behaviour.

- COMMUNICATION is critical to a successful functional assessment. Different people will view an individual's behaviour differently depending on the relationship and/or environment. All information needs to be provided to the professional, regardless if someone else has a different opinion/experience.

- COLLABORATIVE TEAM approach is important. Everyone has information and insight to contribute to the discussion and formulation of teaching and intervention strategies. Differences in opinions between staff, family and/or the qualified person need to be addressed and resolved before a plan is implemented.

- ACCURACY is essential. When observing and documenting an individual's behaviour, it is critical the charts are completed in a timely way that ensures the information is absolutely accurate.

- THOROUGHNESS is important. If there is not enough room on a chart or form, add a second page. The more information the qualified person has access to, the better their understanding of the situation.

Conclusion

A functional assessment process is necessary to help understand an individual's behaviour of concern. It is essential to identifying appropriate and helpful teaching strategies and interventions that will support the individual in achieving the quality of life they desire.

When used effectively, it can be a helpful part of the overall planning process to ensuring the individual has the appropriate resources and supports to achieve their desired quality of life. In closing, it is important to remember that a functional assessment is part of planning for an individual with complex needs and challenging behaviours. There are other tools such as person centered plans, risk assessments, crisis intervention plans and service plans that are important to ensuring the best quality of service.

Resources

Textbooks

Fischer, W. W., & Piazza, C.C. (2011). *Handbook of applied behaviour analysis.* NY: Guildford Publications.

Malott, R. W. (2008). *Principles of Behaviour (6th ed).* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Meyer, L. H., & Evans, I. M., (1989). *Nonaversive intervention for behaviour problems: A manual for home and community.* Toronto: Paul H Brookes Publishing Co.

O'Neil, R. E., Horner, R. F., Albin, R. W. Albin, R.W., Storey, K., & Sprague, J.F. (1996). *Functional assessment and program development for problem behaviour: A practical handbook.* Florence, KY. Wadsworth Publishing.

Wheeler, J.J., & Richey, D.D. (2010). *Behaviour management: Principles and practices of positive behaviour supports.* San Francisco: Pearson.

Academic Journals

International Journal of Behavioural Consultation and Therapy

Journal of Applied Behaviour Analysis

Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behaviour

The Behavioural Analysis Today

Websites

Institute of Applied Behavioural Analysis

- This organization is well respected and offers training and resources for professionals in the area of Applied Behavioural Analysis. http://www.iaba.com

Kansas Institute for Positive Behaviour Support

- This site offers resources, information and tools to help document and record behaviours. http://www.kipbs.org/new_kipbs/fsi/behavassess.html

References

Wheeler, J.J., & Richey, D.D. (2010). Behaviour management: Principles and practices of positive behaviour supports. San Francisco: Pearson.

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