

# Research Highlights

## Topic: Positive Behavior Support

Baker, D.J., Blumberg, R., & Freeman, R. (2002). Considerations for functional assessment of problem behavior among persons with developmental disabilities and mental illness. In J. Jacobson, J. Mulick, and S. Holburn (Eds.), *Programs and services for people with dual developmental and psychiatric disabilities* (pp. 51-66). Kingston, NY: NADD.

### BOTTOM LINE

Problem behaviors are common among persons with the dual diagnosis of developmental disabilities and mental illness. Supporting these individuals in the community presents unique challenges. Functional assessment can contribute to a greater understanding of problem behavior among this population; it allows for a level of precision in seeing how mental illness interacts with environmental events. Functional assessment also assists in developing behavior support strategies. This chapter focuses on functional assessment strategies for persons with dual diagnosis.

### TIPS

- Engender feelings of hope and empowerment in team members by discussing with them the logic of functional analysis and describing the process of functional assessment, the development of the support plan, and the process of intervention and maintenance.
- Use information from a comprehensive functional assessment to distinguish among types of mental disorders that may share common features, or between a mental disorder and a non-psychiatric condition that may have a similar symptomatology.
- Understanding the setting event will enable you to better understand the reason for problem behavior and to intervene in a more proactive manner.
- Use the functional assessment process to demystify the relationships between critical behaviors, the context, and both antecedents and consequences.

- Use information gathered during a functional assessment process to develop a set of recommendations for improving behavior support.

## KEY FINDINGS

- *Overview of functional assessment—Understanding why problem behavior occurs:* Analysis of the interaction between behavior and environment is necessary to the understanding of the variables that maintain problem behaviors.
  - ◆ Functional assessment refers to a process for gathering information about an individual's behavior and the environmental variables that influence that behavior, and includes a number of strategies. One strategy, functional analysis, involves the manipulation of environmental events under experimental conditions.
  - ◆ Events preceding problem behavior: Functional assessment methods identify the variables that can be used to reliably predict problem behavior.
    - Antecedents are events that immediately precede the problem behavior.
    - Setting events are broader contextual variables that increase or decrease the likelihood of problem behavior by altering the reinforcing or aversive properties of stimuli.
  - ◆ Identifying adaptive behavior: The functional assessment gathers information about the individual's communication and social skills for the purpose of designing interventions to teach the individual new skills effectively competing with a problem behavior.
  - ◆ Outcomes of functional assessment: A functional assessment is considered complete when the following outcomes are accomplished:
    - There is a clear and measurable definition of the problem behavior.
    - The events, times and situations that predict both the occurrence and nonoccurrence of problem behavior are determined.
    - Consequences that maintain problem behavior are identified.
    - Hypotheses regarding the function maintaining problem behavior are developed.
    - Direct observation data identifying and confirming the function of the problem behavior is completed.
  - ◆ Functional assessment methods: Types of functional assessment methods include indirect assessment, direct assessment and functional analysis.
    - Indirect assessment: Information is gathered by conducting interviews, reviewing written records, and/or using checklists and questionnaires.
    - Direct assessment: The individual with problem behavior is observed to clearly identify when the behavior occurs, what happens right before the behavior, what the behavior looks like, and how people respond to the occurrence of the behavior.
    - Functional analysis: The hypotheses are systematically tested by manipulating the variables or events that are thought to be associated with the occurrence of problem behavior.

## KEY FINDINGS cont.

- *Characteristics of functional assessment:* The major focus of functional assessment is to gather information used to redesign the environment while considering the complex interactions an individual may have with others in their environment.
- *Is functional assessment appropriate for assessing people with dual diagnosis?* During the functional assessment process, attention is paid to the whole individual's life instead of focusing narrowly on the problem behavior alone. This is particularly important when supporting an individual with both developmental disabilities and mental illness.
  - ◆ Functional assessment can be a valuable process for gathering information about the relationship between physiological variables influencing an individual and environmental events.
  - ◆ Physiological influences can be seen as internal events within a person's biological system that partly determine an individual's response to the environment. When a physiological event increases the likelihood that a person will engage in problem behavior, it is referred to as a setting event. Mental illness may be a potential setting event that alters the behavior of an individual.
    - The functional assessment process may aid in identification of times or situations that are associated with higher levels of physiological arousal.
    - Functional assessment also can provide important data relating to cyclical patterns of problem behavior.
- *The problem of diagnosis and differential diagnosis:* The problem of accurate diagnosis of mental disorders is particularly difficult when issues of differential diagnosis are concerned. The information obtained from a comprehensive functional assessment could help to distinguish among the types of disorders that potentially could be diagnosed and treated.
- *Integrating psychiatric approaches into functional assessment:* The behavior specialist who is knowledgeable about mental illness and psychiatric treatments is uniquely positioned to design effective supports, educate the various participants on the treatment team, and to coordinate and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions.
  - ◆ The process of functional assessment can be a strategy to demystify the relationships between critical behaviors, the context, and both antecedents and consequences. The following are recommended steps in behavior support:
    - Meet with the person and those who know him or her best, including the family and/or team.
    - Gather data using direct and indirect functional assessment methods.
    - Present functional assessment to the team, family, or careproviders.
    - Assist with brainstorming to develop and provide behavioral intervention, including environmental interventions, instructional intervention, counseling approaches, and pharmaceutical interventions.

---

RELATED  
PUBLICATIONS

- Carr, E.G., Horner, R.H., Turnbull, A.P., Marquis, J.G., Magito-McLaughlin, D., McAtee, M.L., Smith, C.E., Ryan, K.A., Ruef, M.B., & Doolabh, A. (1999). *Positive behavior support as an approach for dealing with problem behavior in people with developmental disabilities: A research synthesis*. Washington, DC: American Association on Mental Retardation.
- Freeman, R.L., Baker, D., Horner, R.H., Smith, C., Britten, J., & McCart, A. (2002). Using functional assessment and systems-level assessment to build effective behavioral support plans. In K. C. Lakin & N. Weisler (Eds.), *Alternative community behavioral support and crisis response programs* (pp.199-224). Washington, DC: American Association on Mental Retardation.
- Sailor, W., Scott, T. M., Nelson, C. M., Freeman, R., Smith, C., Britten, J., & McCart, A. (2000). Using information technology to prepare personnel to implement functional behavioral assessment and positive behavioral support . *Exceptionalities*, 8(3), 217-230.

---

*This research was conducted in collaboration with the Beach Center on Disability. It was funded by the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Families of Children with Disabilities of the National Institute on Disability Rehabilitation and Research (H133B980050) and private endowments. For more information, contact the Beach Center on Disability at 1200 Sunnyside Avenue, 3111 Haworth Hall, The University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045-7534. Phone: 785-864-7600. Email: [Beachcenter@ku.edu](mailto:Beachcenter@ku.edu). Website: [www.beachcenter.org](http://www.beachcenter.org).*

Permission granted to reproduce and distribute this research brief.  
Please credit the Beach Center on Disability