

# Individualized Intensive Interventions: Determining the Meaning of Challenging Behavior



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**The Center on the Social and Emotional  
Foundations for Early Learning**



**Administration for  
Children & Families**



**Child Care  
Bureau**



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## Learner Objectives

- Participants will be able to define forms and function of communication and identify the behavioral mechanisms that contribute to viewing challenging behavior as communicative.
- Participants will describe methods that may be used to determine the function of challenging behavior.
- Participants will be able to use interview and observation data to determine the communicative function of challenging behavior.
- Participants will be able to develop a behavior hypothesis from functional assessment information.

## Suggested Agenda

- |               |  |           |
|---------------|--|-----------|
| <b>I.</b>     | Introduction to the Topic<br>Video Clip: Severe Challenging Behavior                           | (15 min.) |
| <b>II.</b>    | Group Discussion: Challenging Behavior Challenges  | (15 min.) |
| <b>III.</b>   | Overview of Positive Behavior Support (PBS)  | (20 min.) |
| <b>IV.</b>    | Activity: Behavior Is Communication  | (10 min.) |
| <b>V.</b>     | Behavior Equation  | (15 min.) |
| <b>VI.</b>    | Process of PBS, Building a Team  | (15 min.) |
| <b>VII.</b>   | Group Discussion: Welcoming Families   | (10 min.) |
| <b>VIII.</b>  | Introduction to Functional Assessment  | (10 min.) |
| <b>IX.</b>    | Activity: Observation with Intention   | (5 min.)  |
| <b>X.</b>     | Functional Assessment Observation  | (10 min.) |
| <b>XI.</b>    | Activity: Observing the Function of Behavior<br>Video Clip: Observing the Function of Behavior | (20 min.) |
| <b>XII.</b>   | Conducting Observations, Data to Collect   | (30 min.) |
| <b>XIII.</b>  | Functional Assessment Interview  | (50 min.) |
| <b>XIV.</b>   | Case Study Activity: Determining the Function  | (50 min.) |
| <b>XV.</b>    | Hypothesis Development   | (10 min.) |
| <b>XVI.</b>   | Case Study Activity: Hypothesis Development  | (20 min.) |
| <b>XVII.</b>  | Not Sure about the Hypothesis  | (5 min.)  |
| <b>XVIII.</b> | Summary  |           |

## Materials Needed

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|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Agenda</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> PowerPoint or Overheads</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Challenging Behavior Video or CD or DVD (or use video link on PowerPoint)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Chart Paper or White Board and Markers</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Video Clips <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> 3a.1: Severe Challenging Behavior</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> 3a.2: Observing the Function of Behavior</li> </ul> </li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Module 3a: Presenter's Answer Guide</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Session Evaluation Form (H3a.SE)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Handouts</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> 3a.1: PowerPoint Slides for Participants</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> 3a.2: Talking with Families Do's and Don'ts</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> 3a.3: Observation Cards<br/><i>(Eight Copies for Each Participant)</i></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> 3a.3h: Home Observation Card</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> 3a.4: Blank Functional Assessment Interview Form</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> 3a.4J: Jackson's Functional Assessment Interview Form</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Case Study Materials <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Child Descriptions:<br/>(Handouts 3a.5D, 3a.5P, 3a.5Q, 3a.5S, 3a.5SH)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Completed Interview<br/>(Handouts 3a.6D, 3a.6P, 3a.6Q, 3a.6S, 3a.6SH)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Observation Cards<br/>(Handouts 3a.7D, 3a.7P, 3a.7Q, 3a.7S, 3a.7SH)</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul> |
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## I. Introduction to the Topic (15 minutes)

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- A. Explain that this workshop will provide participants with the information needed to understand the purpose of challenging behavior. It is part 1 of two workshops that provide the skills needed to implement a process of Positive Behavior Support.
1. Point out that Positive Behavior Support or PBS was developed to address the intervention needs of children with the most challenging behavior.
  2. Note that the full process, as participants will learn in these two workshops, is elaborate, thorough, and very effective. It is not a process that they would use with every child who has behavioral concerns; it is for the child whose challenging behavior continues after participants have tried prevention approaches and developmentally appropriate child guidance procedures.
  3. Explain that today you will be talking about how challenging behavior occurs and is maintained through environmental factors.
  4. Note that you will discuss a method for analyzing challenging behavior as it occurs within natural contexts that may be used to identify the purpose of challenging behavior.
  5. Note that participants will view video clips that will offer a context from which they can practice those methods.
  6. Finally, explain that participants will learn how to use multiple sources of data to determine the function of challenging behavior, and they will have an opportunity to apply those skills with a case study example.
- B. Show today's agenda (**Slide 2**), and discuss the objectives for this workshop (**Slide 3**).
1. Participants will be able to define forms and function of communication and identify the behavioral mechanisms that contribute to viewing challenging behavior as communicative.

(continued)

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2. Participants will describe methods that may be used to determine the function of challenging behavior.
  3. Participants will be able to use interview and observation data to determine the communicative function of challenging behavior.
  4. Participants will be able to develop a behavior hypothesis from functional assessment information.
- C. Explain that you are going to talk about a process—the process of Positive Behavior Support—that may be used to address the needs of children with persistent challenging behavior.

1. Show **Slide 4**. What we are referring to when we say “challenging behavior” is:
  - a. Any repeated pattern of behavior that interferes with learning or engagement in prosocial interactions with peers and adults.
  - b. Behaviors that are not responsive to the use of developmentally appropriate guidance procedures.
  - c. Prolonged tantrums, physical and verbal aggression, disruptive vocal and motor behavior (e.g., screaming, stereotypy), property destructions, self-injury, noncompliance, and withdrawal.

2. Say, “Let’s look at the kind of behaviors that can be addressed using this process.”

3. Show the 3-minute video clip (**Slide 5** or **video clip 3a.1**: Severe Challenging Behavior Video Vignette) that depicts several children having severe challenging behavior to illustrate the topic: “These are the kind of behaviors we are talking about.”

- D. Point out that the training today will focus on the top of the pyramid (**Slide 6**).

1. Explain that you will be discussing an intervention process that is designed to address the challenging

*(continued)*

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or



(video clip 3a.1)

6

7

**II. Group Discussion:  
Challenging Behavior  
Challenges**  
(15 minutes)



behaviors of children with the most challenging behavior.

2. Remind participants that the top of the pyramid is reserved for a very few number of children who still exhibit challenging behavior even when teachers have addressed everything else in the pyramid: staff have positive relationships with the children; the classroom has been arranged carefully to promote appropriate behavior; and there is a systematic approach to teaching social and emotional skills.
3. Intensive individualized instruction and interventions are used with children who have very persistent and severe challenging behavior and do not respond to the typical preventive practices, child guidance procedures, or social emotional teaching strategies that would normally work with most children (Slide 7).
  - A. Using chart paper, ask participants to list challenging behaviors that occur that are beyond what they expect developmentally from a child. "I'm sure many of you have worked with children who have persistent challenging behavior. Tell me the kind of behaviors you have seen. Remember, we are talking about challenging behavior that is persistent and unresponsive to the use of good guidance procedures."
  - B. Ask participants to list the interventions that they have tried on a new piece of chart paper (examples of responses may be redirect, ignore, time-out).
  - C. Ask participants to reflect on whether the interventions were effective and allow them to discuss their perspectives on the methods they have used.
  - D. You may want to comment that the interventions listed, the interventions that are in the typical early educator's toolbox, may not be systematic or comprehensive enough to address these types of challenging behaviors. This module and the next module will offer a process and approach for successfully making a difference for these types of behaviors.

*(continued)*

### III. Overview of Positive Behavior Support (PBS) (20 minutes)

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9-10

11

12

- E. Ask participants if they knew why the child was engaging in the challenging behavior.
- F. Facilitate a discussion that helps participants understand that if they know why children have challenging behavior, it may be easier to develop effective interventions.
- A. Explain that over the next two days, participants will be learning about the process of Positive Behavior Support. Show overheads (Old Way/New Way **Slide 8**).
- B. Explain that challenging behavior carries meaning and communicates a message.
1. In some instances, when children do not have the language skills necessary to communicate appropriately they will resort to using challenging behavior as a means of communication.
  2. A child who has limited social skills or has learned that challenging behavior will result in meeting his or her needs may also use challenging behavior instead of language (**Slides 9-10**).
  3. Children engage in challenging behavior because “it works” for them. Challenging behavior results in the child gaining access to something (i.e., obtain) or avoiding something (i.e., escape) (**Slide 11**).
- C. Positive Behavior Support is based on the assumption that children’s challenging behavior has meaning. Explain how we have many forms of communication to express functions (**Slide 12**). For example, to express dissatisfaction with a workshop:
1. Participants might complain; they might find something else to do (i.e., engage in off-task behavior).

*(continued)*

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**IV. Activity: Behavior Is Communication**  
(10 minutes)

14-19

2. They might leave the room (in behavioral terms, that is elopement!).
  3. If it really became too much to bear, they might scream.
- D. Point out that all of these forms of communication tell you that they want to change the workshop content or escape.
1. As children learn to communicate, they communicate about many things (**Slide 13**). Pose these questions to the group:
    - a. What are some of the first things that children communicate?
    - b. When children first communicate, they may use different forms of communication behavior. How do children first tell you “no” or “want?”
    - c. What about when they are 9 months old and don’t have words?
  2. Explain that, in communication behavior, we can identify both the function of communication (e.g., request, protest, comment) and the form of communication (e.g., cry, point, use words).
- A. Tell participants that you’re going to show them several scenarios of children communicating something and that you’ll want them to identify what the child is communicating.
  - B. Show six written examples of situations (**Slides 14-19**), and ask the group to identify the function of the behavior.
  - C. There may be more than one possible explanation of some of these situations, but listed below are some possible functions:

*(continued)*

1. Evan—requesting help
2. Shana—requesting food
3. Christina—requesting bottle
4. Tim—protest child access to his road-way
5. Madison—protest child access to materials
6. Kyra—request to play

D. Once you have completed the scenarios, ask the group:

1. How were they able to determine the function?  
Answers may be: by reading about what else was going on, by knowing the circumstances, etc.
2. What gave them information that made it possible?
3. Would it be enough to know that Shana was crying and banging her head? Answer should be “no.”
4. What helped them identify the function?

## V. Behavior Equation (15 minutes)

A. Often, people feel that children engage in challenging behavior for “no reason at all” or that the behavior “came out of the blue”; but if we really look at what is happening around behavior you can often discover causes or triggers for the behavior.

1. Point out, however, that some of the reasons as to why children (or adults) behave the way that they do may not be as apparent as one would hope.
2. Sometimes a past event or medical condition can increase the likelihood that a behavior will occur.

B. Point out that “We use context to figure out the meaning of children’s behavior as we did in the previous examples.” In behavioral theory, the analysis of context occurs in the following way.

1. We look at the basic behavioral equation (**Slide 20**).

*(continued)*



21

22

23

24-29

2. There are triggers in the environment that affect behavior. For example, Joey is asked to come to circle (trigger); he resists and hits his teacher (the behavior); and then the teacher lets him find something else to do (maintaining consequence).

C. In addition to the basic equation, sometimes children are more likely to have challenging behavior because of some other event (e.g., they are tired or don't feel well). These events are called setting events (**Slide 21**).

1. Show chart (**Slide 22**) that depicts triggers, behaviors, and maintaining consequences. Explain.
2. Show next slide (**Slide 23**) that puts setting events into the formula.
3. Use six examples again (**Slides 24-29**). Ask the group to identify the triggers, behaviors, and maintaining consequences as you display each slide again. For example:

#### *Evan*

- Trigger—Evan can't get the blocks together.
- Behavior—Evan fusses, holds up the blocks and looks at the teacher.
- Maintaining Consequence—Teacher puts the blocks together for him.

#### *Shana*

- Trigger—Shana is sitting in the high chair with nothing to do and sees the oatmeal.
- Behavior—Shana cries and bangs her head.
- Maintaining Consequence—Oatmeal is placed on her tray.

#### *Christina*

- Trigger—Christina looks around room and doesn't see her bottle.
- Behavior—Christina cries and reaches toward the refrigerator.
- Maintaining Consequence—Mom warms bottle and gives it to Christina.

## VI. Process of PBS, Building a Team (15 minutes)

30

31



### *Tim*

- Trigger—A child moves to the sandbox where Tim has just built something.
- Behavior—Tim tackles and hits the child.
- Maintaining Consequence—Tim gets to go to the sandbox and continues building.

### *Madison*

- Trigger—Another child takes a toy from the area where Madison is playing.
- Behavior—Madison shouts at the child and bites her.
- Maintaining Consequence—Madison goes back and gets the toy, and the other child goes with the teacher to another activity.

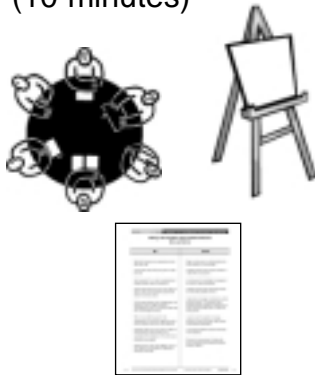
### *Kyra*

- Trigger—Kyra sees other children playing with the train.
- Behavior—Kyra grabs one of the trains.
- Maintaining Consequence—The teacher comes over and assists Kyra in joining in the play.

- A. Now that you have described the philosophy and theory behind PBS, talk a little about the process and how it may be used in participants' classrooms. Show slide of the process (**Slide 30**).
  1. Establishing a team and identifying goals of intervention.
  2. Gathering information—functional assessment.
  3. Developing a hypothesis about the challenging behavior.
  4. Designing a behavior support plan.
  5. Implementing, monitoring, and evaluating outcomes.
- B. Before beginning the process outlined above, the first step is to identify a team and to come together to develop a vision for the child.
- C. Show slide of potential team members (**Slide 31**), and ask participants to identify what each member would bring to the process of working together to change a child's behavior. Write down their responses on chart paper.

(continued)

**VII. Group Discussion:  
Welcoming Families**  
(10 minutes)



(Handout 3a.2)

**VIII. Introduction to  
Functional  
Assessment**  
(10 minutes)



D. Explain that if we are going to encourage families to be part of a team with us; we have to pay attention to making sure that they are comfortable and that they feel welcomed from the very beginning.

A. Using chart paper, ask the group to identify strategies that they have used to make sure the family can be an equal partner when focusing on a child's special support needs.

B. One of the most difficult things is discussing a child's severe challenging behavior with the family. Ask participants to identify do's and don'ts when talking to family members about their child's challenging behavior. Write these suggestions on chart paper.

Refer group to handout "Talking with Families: Do's and Don'ts." (**Handout 3a.2**)

A. The second step of the process of PBS (**Slide 32**) is to conduct a functional assessment.

1. Point out that the functional assessment is an assessment process that gives you information on the purpose of the child's challenging behavior.

2. Stress that the assessment is not a formal test, but it is a set of observations and questions that you will use to dig deeper into the meaning of the child's challenging behavior.

B. Show slide of the process of functional assessment (**Slide 33**).

1. Explain that, earlier, participants looked at some examples of challenging behavior from which they were able to interpret the meaning of the child's behavior.

2. Note that you will do the same thing in the process of functional assessment (**Slide 34**).

**IX. Activity: Observation with Intention**  
(5 minutes)


 35


 36

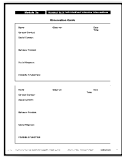
**X. Functional Assessment Observation**  
(10 minutes)


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3. Point out that functional assessment involves observing the child in settings where challenging behavior may occur and observing what circumstances are associated with appropriate behavior.
4. Note that as they observe, they will collect data on the child's behavior; that is, they will record information that can later be analyzed to determine the function of the child's behavior.
5. Finally, explain that they will use interviews to capture the perspectives of people who know the child best and who can provide important information that will assist them in understanding the child (e.g., the family).
  - A. Telephone letters. Tell all participants with cell phones to put them under the table.
  - B. Point out that looking at the PowerPoint slide in the handout (**Slide 35**), they have the numbers that appear on the keypad of a telephone.
  - C. Ask participants to quickly fill in where the letters go.
  - D. Ask whether anyone was able to do it; then provide the answer (**Slide 36**).
  - E. Talk about how we can see something every day, even multiple times a day, and not really notice all the details.
  - F. Discuss how observation of children needs to be focused.
    - A. Stress that observation is a critical component. Show blank card (**Slide 37**) as one format for collecting observation information.
    - B. Note that this is one, very simple method to use for observation.

### XI. Activity: Observing the Function of Behavior

(20 minutes)



(Handout 3a.3)



(video clip 3a.2)



### XII. Conducting Observations: Data to Collect

(30 minutes)



- C. Explain that they write down their names, the child's name, date of observation, and the general setting of the observation.
  - D. Explain that they then describe the social context in which the challenging behavior occurs, the behavior with detail, and what follows the behavior.
  - E. Explain that information recorded on the observation cards helps one to determine the possible function of the behavior.
- A. Ask participants to observe each video clip and then write on the card (**Handout 3a.3**: Observation Cards) what they observed. (**Show video clips 3a.2**: Vignettes of three different children.)  
*Note*: Participants will need 6 blank cards.
  - B. Begin each segment and pause between each segment to allow participants to record observations.
  - C. After each of the vignettes has been observed, ask participants to complete an observation card.
  - D. Watch each video clip and then display the completed observation cards (**Slides 38-49**).
- A. Point out that their observation forms can also be helpful.
    1. Show setting events form (**Slides 50 and 51**) that is completed; ask participants what can be determined. (Responses from group may include (**Slide 50**) that the child has more challenging behavior when he has slept poorly and that something in the morning must also be related to tantrums [does not appear to be related to sleep]. On **Slide 51**, the child is more likely to have a tantrum if he has come to school on the bus.)

52

2. Explain scatterplot; show form (Slide 52) that has been completed. A scatterplot involves recording the times of the day (and/or activities) in which the behavior does and does not occur to identify patterns that occur over days or weeks. Ask participants what can be determined (e.g., the challenging behavior occurs right before lunch; child may be hungry).

53-54

3. Show an activity analysis (Slides 53 and 54). Explain that the activity analysis may be used to determine what the problem areas are within an activity or routine. Ask participants what can be determined (e.g., the child is having peer exchange/interaction difficulties in Slide 53, and child is having difficulty taking one item and only eating items on her plate in Slide 54).

55-56

B. It's very helpful for families to also contribute observations of challenging behavior at home (Slide 55).

1. The rule is to KIS it (Keep It Simple) (Slide 56).

57



(Handout 3a.3h)

C. Refer to handout called "Home Observation Card" (Handout 3a.3H). This card can be used by families when doing observations. (Slide 57)

### XIII. Functional Assessment Interview (50 minutes)

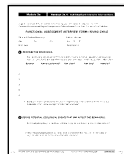
58-59



(Handout 3a.4J)

A. Functional Assessment Interview. Discuss the need for, and benefit of, an interview (Slide 58), and the value of different people's perspectives, and how interviews are useful for gathering comprehensive information in a short period of time.

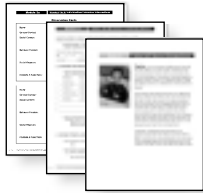
B. Show completed interview on the sample child (Slide 59) (handout of Jackson's Interview Handout 3a.4J). After each section, point to what the interview captures.



(Handout 3a.4)

C. As a group, fill out the last section. Participants should have a blank functional assessment interview (Handout 3a.4: Functional Assessment Interview).

**XIV. Case Study Activity: Determining the Function**  
(50 minutes)



Small Group Activity



- A. Divide the group into case study groups (no more than five). Use slide of roles in the group work. Ask each group to form their roles and write their roles on the presentation form (slides 60-61).
- B. Provide each case study group with child descriptions (Handouts 3a.5D, 3a.5P, 3a.5Q, 3a.5S, 3a.5SH), completed interviews (Handouts 3a.6D, 3a.6P, 3a.6Q, 3a.6S, 3a.6SH) and observation cards (Handouts 3a.7D, 3a.7P, 3a.7Q, 3a.7S, 3a.7SH).
- C. Complete last section of the Functional Behavior Assessment Interview (FBAI).
- D. Ask the group to review the materials, discuss, and identify the function of the child’s challenging behaviors (Slide 62).
- E. Present functions of challenging behavior to the group.

Note: Module 3a Presenter’s Answer Guide for “Case Study Activity: Determining the Function of Challenging Behavior” contains the function of each challenging behavior for each case study child. The “Presenter’s Answer Guide” is intended to be used by only the presenter.

**XV. Hypothesis Development**  
(10 minutes)



- A. Show process (Slide 63), and note that you have discussed the first two steps of the process. The third step is to develop a hypothesis.
- B. Explain that when functional assessment is complete, you develop a hypothesis. Show parts of hypothesis (Slide 64).
- C. Put up hypothesis statements and ask the group to identify parts (Slides 65-67). Use Jackson as an example: Challenging behavior—withdrawing or resisting by throwing objects, screaming, stating “shut up.”
  - 1. Predictors—activities that he finds difficult such as structured language-based activities, sharing objects, or interactive play.

**XVI. Case Study Activity:  
Hypothesis  
Development**  
(20 minutes)



Small Group  
Activity

**XVII. Not Sure about the  
Hypothesis**  
(5 minutes)



**XVIII. Summary**  
(5 minutes)



2. Purpose of behavior—avoid the demands of the activity.
3. Maintaining consequences—adults allow him to leave the activity.

- A. Ask each group to look at their case study child and write a hypothesis for their child (**Slide 68**).
- B. Ask each group to present its hypothesis.

*Note:* Module 3a Presenter’s Answer Guide for “Case Study activity: Determining the Function of Challenging Behavior” contains charts that provide all the components of each hypothesis for each case child. The “Presenters Answer Guide” is intended to be used by the *presenter only*.

- A. Show **Slide 69**. Point out that sometimes participants may have some uncertainty about their hypotheses. For example, it may seem that the child hits to escape an activity and then continues to cry to get comfort or attention.
- B. Suggest that one way to think about the hypothesis is to pose the question “What would make the challenging behavior stop?” Is it something they would provide or allow the child access to? Or is it something to remove or allow the child to leave?
- C. Note that if they are still unsure, they can collect more data in the same context. Point out that it is possible for challenging behavior to have the same form but serve multiple functions. For example, hitting may be used to escape in one context and serve to initiate a social interaction in another. It is also possible for challenging behavior that occurs in an episode to begin around one function (e.g., escape) and continue to access something additional (e.g., attention). On those occasions, participants would include that observation in their hypothesis statement and develop a plan that addresses both functions.

- A. Show **Slide 70**. Review the major messages of the workshop.