



**ITA**

**International Teachers Association**

---

## **MODULE 21: Conducting a Functional Autism Assessment**

This module focuses on why a Functional Autism Assessment is needed and how it is achieved through a Functional Behavioural Assessment. Essentially the FBA is a tool that can help educators to find the most appropriate strategies to help individual Autistic students with behavioural difficulties. Appropriate strategies will enable them to achieve their potential without the added difficulties that some antecedents can bring. The module also discusses the methods that are used to gather observation data and its interpretation.

21.1 FBA

21.2 Methods

21.3 Descriptive V Experimental

21.4 Cautions needed before performing and FBA

21.5 Analyzing the Data

### **21.1 FBA (Functional Behavioural Assessment) (1 of 4)**

The main purpose of the Functional Behavioural Assessment is to assess a child's challenging behaviour through observations to determine the cause of their actions that are seen as unacceptable.

The aim is not to determine whether the behaviour is interpreted as 'bad', but to determine what purpose that behaviour may be saying about the child. It is a way of understanding why a child behaves the way they do in particular situations.

The outcome of these observations can determine the best and most appropriate strategies to prevent unacceptable behaviour that has negative outcomes and promote positive behaviour that has positive outcomes.

The FBA aims to be a standardised assessment of formulating an understanding of the function of some behaviour patterns.



**ITA**

## **International Teachers Association**

The important aspect of this type of assessment is that it focuses on the individual and the way that the individual copes under different circumstances and in different scenarios.



### **21.1 FBA (Functional Behavioural Assessment) (2 of 4)**

In earlier modules on this course, we have talked about the fact that there is 'no one size fits all' and that Autism usually occurs with other learning difficulties and everyone has different levels of sensitivity that can heighten or reduce the impact of behaviour.

In most schools doing an FBA is a common requirement. By conducting an FBA the assessor can determine whether a particular behavior always occurs or it was just a 'one-off' in response to an exceptionally threatening experience. The results of the FBA can also be part of a referral for additional specialist support.

Depending on the severity of the challenging behavior, the results of the FBA may indicate that the child should be suspended and an alternative educational setting is sought. These types of assessments are not just used within the education system they are also used in Care and Residential Settings.



**ITA**

## **International Teachers Association**

---

It is also important to realize that an FBA need to take place within a reasonable space of time after an incident that has resulted in challenging behavior (usually it needs to take place within 10 days of any incident).

An FBA can also be used as an ongoing assessment of behavior rather than just to assess an individual incident. Although it is normally used for children who have special needs it can also be used to observe and assess challenging behaviors by children without special educational needs.

### **21.1 FBA (Functional Behavioural Assessment) (3 of 4)**

All behavior assessments are based on the premise that there is a trigger for a particular behavior and there are always consequences for that behavior. In essence the A,B, C of behavior.

A = Antecedent = the Trigger

B = Behavior = the response or action

C = Consequence = what happens next.

If the antecedent is a pleasant one such as a smile or gift, then the behavior will be a positive response.

If the antecedent is unpleasant to an individual or it evokes unpleasant emotions than the response will be one of upset and possibly anxiety. If the antecedent is being pinched or being put into an unfamiliar situation this will cause a negative response such as hitting the person nearest them.

Antecedents will vary from person to person. Likewise the intensity of the reaction will vary tremendously.

One of the concerns regarding observation as a tool for assessing behavior is that, sometimes situations cannot be replicated especially where people are involved. You can risk assess a situation and make predications, but the predications and support guidelines can only be based on the same scenario and same variables happening again.

### **21.1 FBA (Functional Behavioural Assessment) (4 of 4)**



**ITA**

## **International Teachers Association**

---

The FBA has some limitations.

- It was developed with the view of assessing children and adults with severe cognitive disabilities such as Autism.
- The development of the assessment is based around the difficulties that Autistic people have in communicating their ideas and feelings.
- It was felt that if they had difficulty with verbalizing their thoughts that led to their challenging behaviors then by observing their behaviors it could be possible to understand their frustrations and anxieties.

The main focus of the FBA includes:

- To determine whether a student is being educated in the best place (making sure that their needs are met by the facilities available).
- Identify and target positive interventions that enable the student to behave appropriately.
- Identify and target negative interventions that cause anxiety and frustration.

The assessment is based on the following premises:

- Behaviors do not happen in isolation and they are a response to a stimuli (antecedent)
- The intensity of a response behavior will depend on the consequence of that behavior.
- Misbehavior may be the response to bullying or trying to fit in with everyone else.
- Misbehavior may also be the response to the actions (or lack of action) from a teacher.
- Behaviors are bound by consequences such as avoidance or getting a reward.



**ITA**  
**International Teachers Association**

---



### **21.2.1 Methods – Which competencies should assessors have?**

The assessor should be someone who:

- is specifically trained to gather observational information
- is capable of getting a full background history
- understands the importance of acceptable behaviour
- has considerable theoretical and practical knowledge of Autism
- understands that not all situations are predictable
- is able to analyse the data collected
- is able to provide feedback to the parents or guardians with their observations and suggestions
- makes suggestions for the support of the student based on their analysis
- makes suggestions and instruct teaching staff in appropriate strategies

The assessor also needs to be able to:

- adapt or manipulate situations within a safe environment

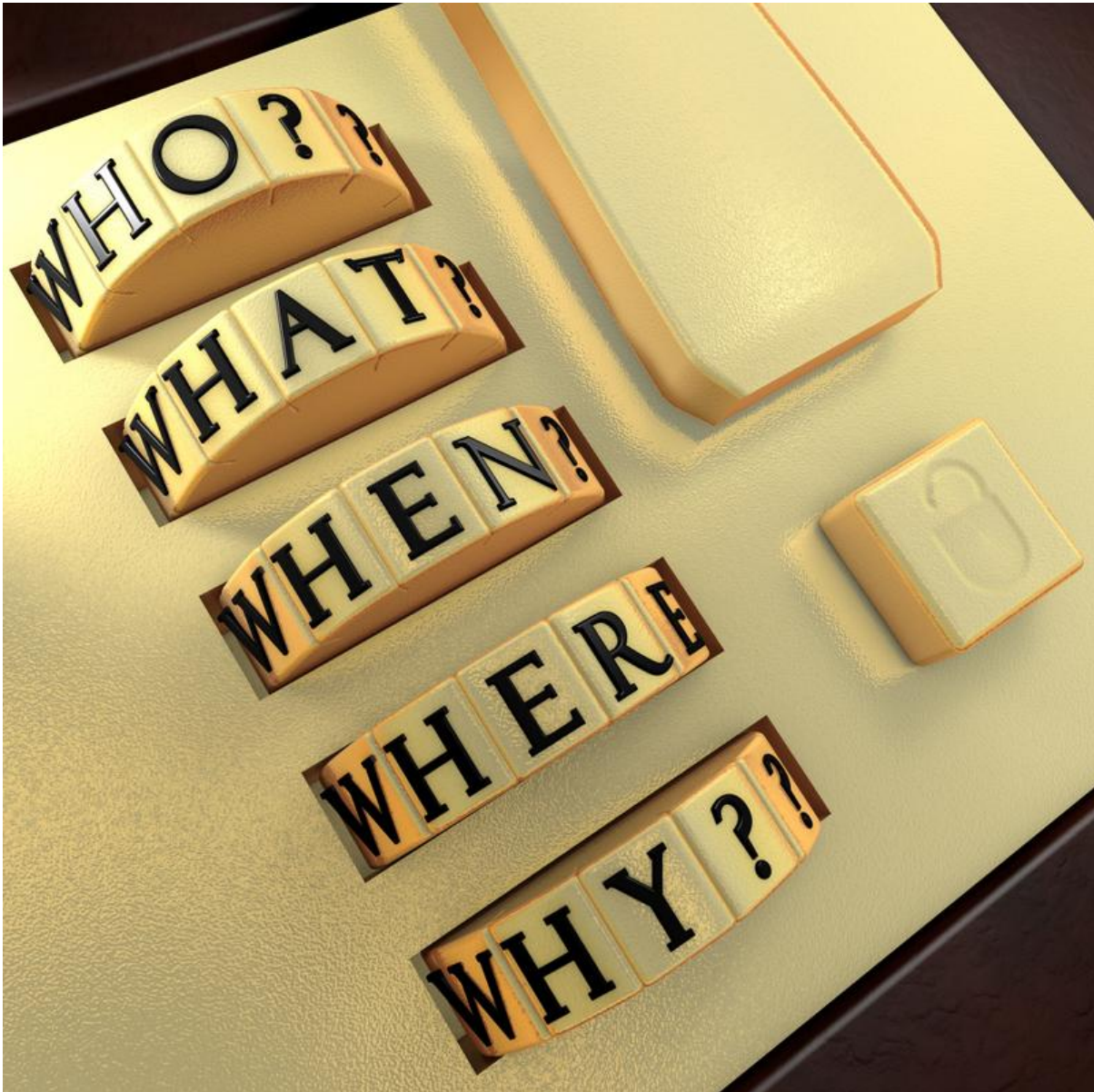


**ITA**  
**International Teachers Association**

---

- perform additional assessments if needed

Ideally a Behavioural Psychologist is needed to perform these assessments.



### **21.2.2 Methods – The three stages of Assessment**

A Functional Assessment has three main stages. These stages are typical but not exclusive as there are other assessments that can be used to identify the causes of challenging behaviours.



**ITA**

## **International Teachers Association**

---

1. Direct Observation. Evidence that needs to be gathered during this stage includes observer records of the Antecedents, Behaviours and the Consequences.
2. Informant Records. This will include notes from interviews with teaching staff, parents and anyone else involved in with the child or the situation. It will also include data from any questionnaires.
3. Functional Analysis. At this point the antecedent and consequences are manipulated under strict and safe conditions to understand the effect of the antecedent upon the child.

Looking at the layout for the assessment you can see how it would be inappropriate to use Functional Analysis as a form of assessment to analyse behaviours such as self-harm, aggression towards others and destructive behaviours.



**ITA**  
**International Teachers Association**

---



Whatever form the assessment takes the goal is always to identify what has caused the challenging behaviour and to devise an intervention that is appropriate and safe for all concerned. The intervention should always target a reduction in the challenging behaviour and allow scope to adapt more acceptable behaviours.

### **21.2.3 Methods – Assessment Methods**

1. Direct Observation.





**ITA**

## **International Teachers Association**

---

The aim of this method is to cultivate an hypothesis regarding the behavior. Ideally the observation should take place within an environment that is natural to the child that is to be observed. In reality a new face in a classroom or in an activity zone can often influence the behavior of others in the room. Sometimes a visitor can spark off attention seeking behavior by others in the room and this can cause a diversion to the focus of the task. The task of the observer is to witness what occurs before the challenging behavior as well as during and after the incident.

### **2. Informant Methods.**

The aim of this method is the same as Direct Observation: to cultivate an hypothesis regarding the behavior. Interviews can give the opportunity to gather information about what happened before and after the incident as well other background information on behaviors. (Severity, number of incidents; impact on others and the way other inappropriate behaviors are dealt with; personal preferences and dislikes).

### **3. Functional Analysis.**

This is where the Behavioral Analyst makes changes to any antecedents and consequences to try to manipulate the behavior. This may take the form of suggested interventions and strategies for the educational staff and parents or it may involve some one-to one therapy with a behavioral psychologist. This method is testing out the hypothesis that was formulated through Direct Observation and Informant Methods.

## **21.3 Descriptive vs. Experimental**

Staying with the Assessment Methods from the last section we now need to divide them up into Descriptive and Experimental cohorts.

### **21.3.1 Descriptive vs. Experimental - Descriptive Functional Assessments**



**ITA**

## **International Teachers Association**

---

Direct Observation and Informant methods are termed as 'descriptive methods' because they describe what is actually happening or what has happened. Behavior is described in terms of what was observed before the antecedent and after the challenging behavior.

Both of these methods for collecting information means you can use this information to devise a hypothesis from which to give an 'educated', guess as to why the behavior happened. Sometimes the reason for the behavior may be apparent based on information that you have gathered from the people that are close to the child. It provides a guesstimate. The theory needs to be investigated, proven or invalidated.

### **21.3.2 Descriptive V Experimental - Experimental Functional Assessments**

This third method is termed as an Experimental Method, as it can identify and target the exact function of the behavior as opposed to speculation.

The Experimental method will strive to manipulate what happens before and after the challenging behavior occurs. Collecting information does not stop just because the assessment has gone into experimental phase. Data is gathered continuously in order to define which variable allows the most positive change in behavior for the longest time.

By the time that the Experimental stage has been reached there should be enough information gathered to allow significant accuracy of the variables to allow success. But as with any type of experimental situation, not all variables can be accounted for or manipulated to order (e.g. health, weather, the reaction and input of others).



**ITA**

**International Teachers Association**

---



## **21.4 Cautions needed before performing and FBA**

Functional Assessments are standard assessments but prior to conducting them several ethical considerations need to be highlighted.

- In cases where a child is deliberately self-harming or showing aggression towards others, any manipulation of the antecedents and consequences could have horrible results.
- In cases of this type the immediate effect of any manipulation may not be apparent, it may lie dormant for a while and manifest through worsening behaviour outbursts or behaviour that transfers into other aspects of the child's life.
- If faced with such behaviours, there needs to be a full risk assessment completed prior to any intervention that involves manipulation of the antecedents or consequences.
- A full risk assessment involves painstaking thorough research to determine both the potential level of risk and the whether any risks are justified given a potential positive outcome.
- If a risk assessment is required then the results need to be shared with a review panel before any interventions takes place.



**ITA**

**International Teachers Association**

---



- Part of gathering information for any assessment (including a risk assessment) should be a full and comprehensive medical history. This is important as something that may just be a nuisance to the majority of people may seem 100 times worse to an Autistic child (remember the hyper and hypo sensitivity issues). Something as simple as constipation or an ear infection can totally upset the child to the point where they find interactions intolerable. Assessing the physical and medical side can rule out any complex interventions.

#### **21.4.1 Cautions needed before performing and FBA - Risk Assessments**

Risk Assessments need to be completed by an assessor who is familiar with the process. A good risk assessment should be able to assess different areas of a



**ITA**

## **International Teachers Association**

---

person's life. If a person is a high risk in new social situations, they may be at low risk in other areas of their life such a meeting with friends.

A full assessment may include the following areas:

- A student may be assessed as an extremely High in the area of Risk to Self (recently overdosed within the last two weeks, regularly self-harms, and has disclosed a suicidal plan)
- Proves to be of no Risk to Others
- Assessed as Medium High, in the areas of Risk from Others (recent Neglect from others, emotional abuse, and vulnerability to exploitation form others).
- Special Needs, has a serious physical illness, Learning difficulties.

A full assessment allows for greater accuracy and flexibility in predicting the risk and greater accuracy in developing support guidelines for positive intervention.



**ITA**  
**International Teachers Association**

---



[HOME](#)

### **21.4.2 Cautions needed before performing and FBA - Triggers**

Additional information also needed about positive and negative triggers.

We all have positive and negative triggers

Positive Triggers - these make us feel good - make us feel that it's worth getting up in the morning. They can include people that are special to us, friends, partners, or it could be achieving something and/or it being recognised and being praised for it, or may be something as simple as sunshine. If a learner cannot identify any positive triggers, this can be a problem as their self-esteem and confidence may be so low, that itself is a risk. Positive



**ITA**

## **International Teachers Association**

---

triggers can also be seen as strategies that the Learner has developed to reduce some of their negative triggers.

Negative triggers –these could include not liking people walking or standing behind us, people shouting, anxiety in new places etc. If the learner is not able to discuss their negative triggers, then the support worker, teacher, parent or other agencies who work with the learner may help. It is of the uppermost importance that every effort should be made to seek this information.



### 5.4.3 Cautions needed before performing and FBA - Gathering information

- A full description of the challenging behaviour and its effect on the child and the people around him.
- A description of what happened before the incident including some information about the some information about the behaviour of the people who were near to the child.
- A description of the environment.



**ITA**

## **International Teachers Association**

---

- A description of what happened after the incident. What were the consequences to the child and the people around him?
- The identified desirable behaviour. (saying 'please go away' as opposed to screaming at others).
- The identified events and people that motivate the child (Positive Triggers).
- The identified events and people that upset the child (Negative Triggers). This can be unintentional upset.
- The identified behaviour function e.g. if they get upset before a break time they can stay in the classroom and have individual attention.
- A full and complete history of the variety of interventions that have already been implemented. Ideally these interventions need to be rated as to their level of success.





**ITA**  
**International Teachers Association**

---



### **21.5.1 Analyzing the Data (1 of 3)**

One of the most important aspects of analysing data is to look for patterns.

After any assessment that is based on observation there will be a vast amount of data,

Data can be:

- Global - relating to the environment, the proximity of other people, temperature, humidity, weather, noise level and time of day.



**ITA**

## **International Teachers Association**

---

- Specific - relating to the child, their mood, known triggers, medical conditions, learning disabilities, ability, home situation (sibling rivalry etc.), the friends they have in the class, past behaviours.

Looking for patterns in the data can seem to be a very big task. Once the data has been divided into Global and Specific areas, the task can seem more manageable.

The data can now show that are some patterns and indications of how and why the challenging behaviour occurred.

### **21.5 Analyzing the Data**

Indications for the reasons behind the challenging behavior: Looking for Patterns: Looking for differences.

#### **21.5.1 Analyzing the Data -Look for the function/purpose of the behavior**

- What was the consequence of this behavior?
- What sort of attention did this behavior get?
- Was it an appropriate response? did the child welcome the response?
- Was the behavior a tantrum or a 'melt down' due to a sensory overload?
- How is a sensory meltdown dealt with at home?
- Is the channeling behavior a common occurrence?

#### **21.5.2 Analyzing the Data - Other factors affecting the behavior (immediate & setting)**

- Were others trying push past the child?
- Was the child sitting in a different place than they normally sit?
- Was there a change of support worker?
- Did the child arrive late at school that day?
- Has anything changed in the classroom?
- Have the cleaners used a different product for cleaning?



**ITA**  
**International Teachers Association**

---



### **21.5.3 Analyzing the Data - Other Areas to Explore**

Other areas to explore can include:

- The curriculum
- Teaching method (not the teacher)
- Work challenges
- Social interactions
- Any biological or medical contributing factors
- Any other emotional influences such as changes in friendships.

As you can see there are many different variables that all have to be taken into consideration in an assessment. It should also be noted that on completion of an FBA one of the recommendations may be for further assessments using other assessment tools.



**ITA**  
**International Teachers Association**

---



**[EXAM LINK](#)**