

Choosing the Right Level of Functional Assessment for Effective Behavior Planning

Behavior support is not one-size-fits-all. Some students need a comprehensive Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) before developing an effective Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP). In other situations, teams may already have enough information to begin planning or can develop an initial BIP while gathering additional information.

This two-question routing tool helps school teams determine the appropriate depth of assessment when a student's behavior is interfering with learning and an individualized BIP is being considered. The questions guide teams toward one of three pathways:

- Path A: Document and Plan.** Enough information is available to develop a BIP.
- Path B: Plan and Gather.** Begin planning while addressing remaining information gaps.
- Path C: Full FBA.** Complete a comprehensive assessment before developing the BIP.

The goal is not the most intensive assessment possible, but enough reliable information to develop an effective, function-based BIP, then continue refining that understanding through implementation and progress monitoring.

This guide is designed for any school team, whether or not they use Behavior Advantage. Where applicable, shaded notes identify supporting Behavior Advantage tools. The Advantage Navigator provides easy access to forms and resources, while BA Academy offers videos and training resources to support implementation.

A Tiered Approach to Functional Assessment

Functional behavior assessment is often treated as all or nothing: complete a full FBA or wait to provide support. This can delay intervention and use valuable specialist time documenting what teams may already know.

Current federal guidance supports a more flexible, tiered approach. It recognizes that FBAs can serve different purposes, including instructional screening and reviewing existing data, and can support any student whose behavior interferes with learning, not just those receiving special education.

The depth of assessment should fit the situation. Teams should consider what is already known, what remains uncertain, student needs, and applicable procedural requirements. District and state requirements may be more specific and should always be followed.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Using Functional Behavioral Assessments to Create Supportive Learning Environments, OSERS and OESE, November 2024. Non-binding guidance; see the note at the end.

Before You Route: Identify Individual vs. Group Needs

When several students in the same setting show similar behavior patterns, classroom or group-level supports may be more effective than multiple individual plans. Current PBIS fidelity criteria also prioritize strengthening universal and targeted supports before adding individualized interventions.

Before proceeding with an individual assessment, consider where the behavior occurs, who is affected, and which pattern best describes the concern.

Classroom or Routine Pattern. Behavior concerns are concentrated in one classroom, period, or routine. Consider environmental changes, clearer expectations, improved routines, and proactive, positive supports before developing individual plans.

In Behavior Advantage: Classroom Support Plan.

Small Group With Similar Needs. Several students share similar support needs. Consider a group intervention with common progress monitoring, such as Check-In/Check-Out (CICO). If one student does not respond while others improve, individualized assessment may be appropriate.

In Behavior Advantage: Set up a CICO Tracker for the group.

Individual Student Pattern. The concern is specific to one student and warrants individualized behavior support. Continue to Question 1 to determine the appropriate depth of functional assessment.

Question 1: Is a Full FBA Required?

Start with procedural requirements. Applicable federal, state, and district rules may determine whether a formal FBA is needed, regardless of how well the team understands the behavior.

Check any that apply:

- ☐ An FBA is being conducted as part of an initial evaluation or reevaluation.
- ☐ A manifestation determination found that the behavior was a manifestation of the student's disability, and an FBA had not been conducted before the behavior occurred.
- ☐ District or state policy requires a formal FBA in this situation.

If any box is checked: Follow the applicable assessment requirements and proceed to Path C. Confirm consent and notice requirements with your special education administrator.

If no boxes are checked: Continue to Question 2 to determine the appropriate depth of assessment.

Important: State and district requirements may be more specific than federal guidance. If requirements are unclear, consult your special education administrator before choosing a pathway.

Question 2: How Well Does the Team Understand the Behavior?

Rate each area based on the information and evidence currently available.

0 = Not yet understood: Insufficient information to answer the question.

1 = Partially understood: Some relevant information is available, but important gaps or uncertainties remain.

2 = Sufficiently understood: Enough information and evidence to answer confidently and support a reasonable working hypothesis, where applicable.

#	Question the team needs to answer	0	1	2
1	What exactly is the behavior of concern, described in observable terms two adults would agree on?	☐	☐	☐
2	When and where is it most likely, and when is it least likely?	☐	☐	☐
3	What reliably happens right before it?	☐	☐	☐
4	What reliably happens right after it?	☐	☐	☐
5	What is the behavior getting the student, or helping them avoid?	☐	☐	☐
6	What can the student already do, both to ask for what they need and to manage when they cannot have it?	☐	☐	☐
7	What does the student find motivating or rewarding?	☐	☐	☐
8	Does the whole team see this the same way?	☐	☐	☐

Rate the evidence, not just familiarity with the student. A rating of 2 means the team can identify information supporting its conclusion. A rating of 1 identifies areas needing clarification, while a 0 indicates more information is needed.

A note about team agreement: Question 8 is critical regardless of other ratings. If team members have different understandings of the behavior, context, or likely function, identify and address those differences before considering the team's hypothesis sufficiently understood. If one person completes the questions independently, use their perspective as a starting point and involve others who know and support the student before finalizing the team's functional understanding and BIP.

Where the Pattern Sends You

Pattern	Path	What it means
Mostly 2s	A. Document and Plan	The team has sufficient information to develop a function-based BIP now.
Mostly 2s, with some 1s	B. Plan and Gather	The team has enough information to begin planning while intentionally gathering information to address remaining gaps.
Multiple 0s or significant uncertainty in critical areas	C. Full FBA	Too many important questions remain unanswered to confidently develop an individualized function-based BIP.
Any Question 1 box is checked	C. Full FBA	A full FBA is required regardless of how much the team already knows.
Significant safety concerns, unclear function, or a well-implemented plan has failed	C. Full FBA	Greater assessment depth and additional behavioral expertise are warranted.

These ratings guide team judgment, not a numerical cutoff. One important unanswered question, particularly about the behavior's context or likely function, may matter more than several areas the team understands well.

Matching the BIP to Student Need

Behavior Intervention Plans can vary in length, detail, and complexity. A student with a clear, predictable behavior pattern may need a brief, focused BIP, while more intensive, complex, or higher-risk needs may require a comprehensive plan with additional procedures, data collection, and implementation supports.

More complex does not automatically mean better. The goal is a plan that matches the student's needs and is practical enough for staff to implement consistently.

Regardless of length or complexity, a function-based BIP may include:

- A clearly defined target behavior
- Student strengths, interests, and motivating factors
- The context and likely function of the behavior
- Prevention strategies that make the behavior less likely and increase opportunities for success
- Teaching strategies for replacement behaviors and skills
- Response strategies that guide how adults respond to the target and replacement behaviors

The level of detail should reflect the student's needs and what the team currently understands. A BIP may emphasize prevention or teaching when other needs are addressed through existing supports or while additional information is gathered. The plan can be expanded or adjusted as the team learns more.

Path A: Document and Plan

Most areas are rated 2. The team has sufficient evidence to develop a function-based BIP.

Bring together people who know the student and document what the team already understands: the behavior, context, likely function, student strengths and skills, and escalation patterns when applicable. Record the supporting evidence and use it to develop the BIP.

Match strategies to the team's understanding of the behavior. Some plans may emphasize prevention when adjusting environmental factors offers the greatest opportunity for improvement. Others may emphasize teaching when the student needs stronger communication, coping, or self-management skills. Many strategies address both. The key is connecting strategies to the student's needs, context, and likely function.

Before implementation, clarify staff responsibilities, training needs, and resources. Set a review date and begin collecting data to evaluate progress.

Choose a data collection method that fits the behavior and monitoring goals:

- **Frequency:** Discrete behaviors staff can count.
- **Duration:** How long the behavior lasts.
- **Partial interval recording:** Behaviors that are difficult to count individually or lack a clear start and stop.
- **Period-by-period ratings:** Overall performance across periods, multiple behaviors or skills, or situations where simpler data collection is needed.

Whenever possible, monitor the skills or replacement behaviors the plan aims to build alongside behaviors targeted for reduction. This helps determine whether the student is learning and using more successful alternatives, not simply whether problem behavior is decreasing.

In Behavior Advantage: Complete the Simple BIP Team Collaboration Form, then develop the Simple BIP. Use the Tracker for period-by-period ratings, Frequency and Duration for counts and elapsed time, or Partial Interval Recording for behaviors difficult to count individually. Review results in Data & Graphs, and access supporting forms and guidance through the Advantage Navigator.

Path B: Plan and Gather

Most areas are sufficiently understood, but some are rated 1. The team has enough information to begin supporting the student while addressing remaining gaps.

Don't delay support while gathering additional information. Develop an initial BIP based on what the team currently understands while collecting targeted information to clarify unanswered questions.

Use areas rated 0 or 1 to guide additional assessment:

- **Antecedents and consequences:** ABC recording to identify patterns.
- **When and where behavior occurs:** Frequency, duration, partial interval, or period-by-period data.
- **Current skills and teaching needs:** Input from the student, family, and staff familiar with the student's communication and self-regulation skills.
- **Motivation:** Student interviews or reinforcement inventories.

In Behavior Advantage: Use the Simple BIP Team Collaboration Form to organize team input, then develop a Simple BIP. Use the Tracker, Frequency and Duration, or Partial Interval Recording tools to gather additional data and review patterns in Data & Graphs. The Advantage Navigator provides ABC Recording Forms, motivation and reinforcement inventories, and other assessment resources.

Set a review date to evaluate new information, student progress, and whether the BIP is being implemented as intended. If progress is limited or evidence challenges the working hypothesis, refine the BIP accordingly.

Path C: Full FBA

Important areas remain insufficiently understood, behavior presents significant safety concerns, a well-implemented plan has not been effective, or procedural requirements call for a full FBA.

Confirm consent and procedural requirements according to district policy before beginning. Then complete a comprehensive assessment using the FBA Step-by-Step Guide, which provides practical guidance for each step and a final completion checklist. Use the findings to develop a comprehensive, function-based BIP matched to the student's needs.

Involve additional behavioral expertise when the function remains unclear, significant safety concerns exist, or a well-implemented plan has not produced the expected progress. The appropriate expertise depends on training and experience in functional assessment, not a particular credential. This may include a school psychologist, behavior specialist, district coach, or Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA). Federal guidance does not specify who may conduct an FBA, though state or district requirements may.

In Behavior Advantage: Open an FBA with BIP. The Advantage Navigator provides supporting resources, including ABC recording forms, structured interviews, behavior chain analysis, reinforcement inventories, and family conversation starters.

Every Path Leads to the Same Three Essentials

Regardless of the assessment pathway or BIP complexity, effective behavior support depends on three things:

- 1 Have a plan.** Build the BIP around what the team understands about the student, behavior, context, and likely function.
- 2 Implement the plan.** Ensure staff understand the BIP and can implement its critical components consistently.
- 3 Monitor progress.** Collect enough data to evaluate implementation and student response.

Assessment continues after the plan begins. The student's response provides new information about the behavior. Expected progress strengthens the team's working hypothesis. When progress is limited, first examine implementation, then revisit the hypothesis and adjust the BIP or gather additional information as needed.

Next Steps by Pathway: Quick Reference

Step	Path A: Document and Plan	Path B: Plan and Gather	Path C: Full FBA
1. Document what you know	Summarize the behavior, context, likely function, strengths, skills, and motivators.	Document what is understood and identify remaining questions.	Complete a comprehensive FBA following applicable procedures.
2. Develop the BIP	Build a function-based BIP using existing information.	Develop an initial BIP based on the working hypothesis.	Use FBA findings to develop a comprehensive, function-based BIP.
3. Address information gaps	Gather more information if new questions emerge.	Collect targeted information to address identified gaps.	Gather and analyze direct and indirect assessment information.
4. Prepare for implementation	Clarify responsibilities, training, and resources.	Prepare staff while information gathering continues.	Establish responsibilities, training, resources, and additional supports.
5. Monitor and review	Set a review date and monitor implementation and progress.	Review implementation, student response, and new information.	Monitor implementation and student response after the BIP begins.
6. Adjust as needed	Refine the BIP or gather more information as needed.	Revisit the hypothesis and BIP. Move to Path C if significant uncertainty remains.	Revisit FBA conclusions and the BIP if progress is limited despite consistent implementation.

Across every pathway: Have a plan, implement the plan, and monitor progress. The pathway determines the depth of assessment, not whether these essential steps occur.

Applying the Pathways Appropriately

An FBA does not replace a special education evaluation. Federal guidance makes clear that an FBA cannot be used to delay or deny an evaluation when a disability is suspected. Determining eligibility for special education and related services requires an appropriate evaluation, not a pathway decision.

Increase support as needs intensify. When behavior presents significant safety concerns, greater complexity, or limited progress despite a well-implemented BIP, teams may need additional expertise, more rigorous data collection, closer family and provider collaboration, and stronger documentation and review procedures. Match the level of support and oversight to the student's needs.

Evaluate each pathway according to its purpose. Formal FBA and BIP quality rubrics are generally designed for comprehensive assessments and plans. Applying those same criteria to a focused Path A or B process may produce misleading results. Use evaluation criteria appropriate to the pathway, reserving comprehensive FBA/BIP quality reviews for Path C products.

Federal Guidance and Disclaimer

This guide references the U.S. Department of Education's *Using Functional Behavioral Assessments to Create Supportive Learning Environments* (OSERS and OESE, November 2024). This non-binding guidance does not create new legal requirements.

This resource supports team decision-making and is not legal advice or a substitute for applicable federal, state, or district requirements. Consent, timelines, and documentation procedures may vary. Confirm local requirements with your special education administrator.