



## Arizona Autism United

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1

### Assessing and Improving Problem Behaviors

It is common for children with autism to have behavior issues that interfere with the development of relationships and the process of learning. Often times it can be difficult for those around the child to figure out why these behaviors are occurring. As interventionists, it becomes imperative to understand why a behavior occurs to effectively and ethically try to change it.

From a behavior analytic perspective, we assume that **behavior is controlled by reinforcement**. There are four common categories of reinforcement that control problem behaviors:

- 1) Access  
*Getting items or activities that you want by engaging in the behavior*
- 2) Attention  
*Getting attention from others because of the behavior (positive or negative attention)*
- 3) Escape or avoidance  
*Avoiding or getting out of a situation you don't like, such as tasks or sensory overload*
- 4) Automatic  
*An internal reinforcer that we cannot see or control, such as sensory stimulation*

These elements are referred to as **functions of behavior**. In order to reduce or eliminate challenging behaviors, we must first understand the conditions that produce the behavior (when does it happen), and the function of the behavior (why does it happen). These can usually be determined through **indirect assessment** (questionnaires), **direct observation** in the natural environment, or a **functional analysis**.

Once the function of a behavior is well understood, a strategy to reduce, replace or eliminate the behavior can be created. In general, these strategies usually involve some combination of:

- 1) Removing reinforcement (so the behavior fades away)
- 2) Providing enough reinforcement so that the behavior is not necessary
- 3) Teaching a positive alternative behavior that also provides reinforcement

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### Functional Analysis

A very reliable method of determining the function of a problem behavior is the *Functional Analysis*.<sup>1,2</sup> For behaviors that present a significant challenge for parents, caregivers and habilitators, AZA United can conduct a functional analysis to more clearly understand the behavior and design an intervention strategy that directly addresses that function.

The functional analysis (F.A.) can be conducted in the AZA United clinic and usually takes about 1 to 2 hours. That time will be broken up into phases that last about 10 or 15 minutes. During each phase the child will have an opportunity to engage in the problem behavior and the interventionist will respond to it a certain way. Parents will work with the interventionist beforehand to develop this plan together.

The F.A. consists of four conditions: Alone, Attention, Play, and Demand. Each condition creates an environment for the child that reinforces the behavior with a specific function. During these 10 minutes, we can see if the behavior increases. If it does, we have likely found one function of the behavior.

Here is what you can expect during each of the four conditions:

- 1) Alone  
*The child will have free time and access to toys without active engagement from others. No one will respond if the problem behavior occurs.*
- 2) Attention  
*The interventionist will be in the room and not really paying attention to the child. If the problem behavior occurs, the interventionist will give the child attention.*
- 3) Play  
*The interventionist will provide toys, social interaction and reinforcers to the child continuously, whether or not the problem behavior occurs.*
- 4) Demand  
*The interventionist will give the child a basic instruction about every 30 seconds. If the problem behavior occurs, the interventionist will remove the demand.*

During the FA, the child can have a 5 minute break between each condition if needed, to leave the room and visit with family or engage in an activity of his or her choice. Families and habilitation providers are invited to observe the sessions from the other side of our two-way mirror wall. Our staff will go through the procedure with the child while other senior staff members remain with the family and provider(s) to answer questions and discuss the events in progress. When finished, we can discuss the results and prepare a report with graphed data. We can then help design, implement and monitor an intervention plan with the family and providers, either at the AZA United clinic or in the family's home.

1. Cooper, J.O., Heron, T. E., & Heward, W. L. (2007). *Applied Behavior Analysis* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

2. Hanley, G.P., Iwata, B.A., & McCord, B. (2003) Functional analysis of problem behavior: A review. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* 36(2), 147-185.