

# ACR Podcast Ep 9 Gathering FBA Information

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Christine Reeve

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Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast, the podcast for special educators who are looking for personal and professional development. I'm your host Dr. Christine Reeve. For more than 20 years, I've worn lots of hats in special education. But my real love is helping special educators like you. This podcast will give you tips and ways to implement research based practices in a practical way in your classroom to make your job easier and more effective.

01:12

Welcome back to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast. I'm Chris Reeve and we are talking these days about problem behavior, which I know is something that is heavy on many of your minds. And we are in the process of talking about the five steps of meaningful behavioral support. In our last episode, I talked about the steps of figuring out how to provide behavioral support that works for the student in the setting. And within that episode, I kind of laid out the framework of the five steps to meaningful behavioral support. And they are the steps that we will be using to solve problem behavior of individual students.

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And now it's time to do more of a deep dive into those steps. In the last episode, I talked about

defining behaviors and setting your priorities. And our next step is then to jump in into how we collect information to start our assessment of the underlying functions of behavior. In today's episode, we'll be talking about step number two in the five step process, gathering all the information we need to begin to figure out why the behaviors are happening. I've talked a lot in this series about the importance of basing our treatment on the function of the behavior rather than the form. And yes, I said it a lot of times and I felt the need to say it again. But this really starts us off on how do we figure that out? How do we figure out what the function is? You can find all the previous episodes in this series at [autismclassroomresources.com/thepodcast](https://autismclassroomresources.com/thepodcast). So let's get started.

03:01

Okay, so our next step in the five steps of meaningful behavioral support is to gather information. Or to paraphrase my friend Abby, one of the consultants that I've worked with the undercover secret behavior detective stage, this is really the crux of assessing the function of the behavior. And there are four kind of stages or steps that we can access and use to gather our information, which I'll address as I go through them all. All of them are important; all have pros and cons about the information that they provide. And essentially what we're doing is we need to gather information to figure out what's going on with the behavior.

03:46

So our first step is to look at the students past records and get an understanding of who is who he or she is. Because you're really never going to be able to figure out what's going on with the student if you don't truly know them. We need to figure out what is motivating and what might serve as a reinforcer. So we do some preference assessments. As another tool that we use, we also need to gather information from people who work or live with the individual teachers, family members, to try to figure out the scope of the behaviors, their impressions, because they have a lot of information that they can give us. Finally, we will need to collect observational data of some kind through direct assessment. And that is really the most time consuming piece. But it's also the most important stage. So we'll talk about a number of ways to do that. And I will talk specifically about data collection and how we can fit it into our classrooms in a reasonable way, in our next episode.

04:53

So our first step in looking at how we gather information is really to review the individuals records. It's one of the most important components of any assessment is to have a really good understanding of who this person is, and what makes them tick. I always feel really great when a parent tells me that I've captured their child, or their child's behavior, in my assessment. That's a

sign to me that I'm on the right track. Another good reason to review as many records as you can access is to find out what has been done before and what has been successful or not successful in the past. First of all, you don't want to repeat the same problems that are same mistakes that were made in the past. So there's no point in doing strategies that have been tried and failed, unless we think there's some reason they'll be different this time. And we also really want to make sure that we know what was working for the individual, and whether or not those things are still in place.

06:00

So for instance, if I see that two years ago, the student had a visual schedule for each transition. And when I observe him, there is no schedule. And particularly if I find that the behaviors seem to occur, and transitions, one of the first things I'm probably going to suggest is putting some type of visual supports back in place.

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Similarly, if the student used to have a communication device, but they're no longer using it, I'm going to try to figure out why and how his or her communication skills have developed to make sure that he has effective communication. So if you're a teacher, or you're working in a school, you have the student's educational records to review, and I highly recommend going into them in depth as much as you can. Now I recognize that most of us do not have a ton of time to spend reading through the records. And I would say if you feel like you have a good understanding about the function of the behavior going into the FBA, you may not need to go back into the records as much. If you are being called in or have a student that these behaviors came out of nowhere or it's a particularly complicated case, the farther you can go back and the more previous information you can get, the better. And that includes asking family members for outside evaluations. If they aren't part of the record, I would definitely ask to look at them. Because you may also find a history of medical issues that can impact behavior in a lot of ways. And we will talk more about that in a future episode.

07:35

So as you review the record to gather information at the beginning, you might be noticing what the student likes or doesn't like. And you may have information about the kinds of reinforcers that have been used for them in the past. But another piece of information that we do need to know is what kinds of likes and dislikes, what kinds of things we might use as a real reinforcer for the individual. And we need to recognize though, that sometimes that changes. So you don't want to use the list of reinforcer for him when he's 5, when he's 15. There are things that I hated as a child that I consume or engage in regularly now. So knowing what someone likes can help to identify

the items or activities that might be reinforcing.

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It's important to recognize that just because somebody likes something, it may not be a reinforcer. And I will talk more about assessing preferences and reinforcers in the future, because it really deserves its own episode because it focuses both on challenging behavior and instruction. So there are really three basic ways to get started assessing reinforcers, that I'll talk about here. But I will come back and talk about I can talk about reinforcers all day long. And you don't want that right now, because we're talking about behavior.

08:56

So the first thing you can do is observe; sometimes it's trial and error to try to figure out what a student likes, so you can observe. Notice what a student does when you leave them on his own in the classroom or recess. What does he pick up? What does he walk around with? One of the things that I've often found useful is What does he want to bring from home and get upset about when you try to take it away when he gets to school? Those are signs that he really likes this thing and that it might work as a reinforcer.

09:28

Another is to do a formal assessment where you present specific activities in a certain order. And you see which things actually increased behavior. And that element is really important because reinforcement is actually defined by whether or not the behavior that it follows increases. It's not a reinforcer, just because he likes it. It's only a reinforcer, if it actually serves to increase the behavior. So a formal assessment for a student that we're having a lot of trouble finding something that really is effective, might be something you do as part of your FBA.

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Another common method to try to figure out what might serve as a reinforcer is to ask parents and staff what they have observed. Now, you won't know from the things that they say that they think the student likes, you won't know for a fact that that is a reinforcer, but it gives you a good place to start. And you can find some links for some of my favorite methods of what we call preference assessments, because we don't know if there were reinforcers, in the post for this episode. And you can find that at [autismclassroomresources.com/episode9](https://autismclassroomresources.com/episode9).

10:38

Another way that you can find out is to ask the student and we have a tendency in the in the area developmental disabilities, where I spend a lot of my time, we do so much undercover detective work trying to figure out the functions of behavior. And our students are unable to necessarily tell us what they like, that sometimes we forget that some of our students, we can just ask, and they can tell us what they want to work for. So one way that you can do that is to ask just ask them to tell you.

11:09

Another is to use a student survey that asks them to identify what might be motivating for them. You can also do what's called a forced choice assessment where the student has to choose between two types of activities. And I'll include links to some of those on the blog page as well.

11:26

Our next step in the process of behavioral support and gathering information is to get information from everybody working with or surrounding the individual who is demonstrating the problem behavior. And we can do this in a variety of ways using variety of methods. A large variety of questionnaires and checklists have been developed over the years, that attempt to ask questions about the behavior and have the informant rate specific elements. So does this behavior occur when the individual is alone? Or is this behavior likely to occur when there is a demand placed on the student. And some have the informant rate the estimated frequency that one of the actions would result in challenging behavior. Sometimes it's just a yes or no question. The people who complete the checklist or that you interview might be teachers, parents, paraprofessionals, related service providers, anybody who can give you information about the students behavior. And sometimes that's going to also include the student.

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So another form that you might do is an interview. So like checklists, we're completing them with a variety of people; we can do them formally or informally. And there have been a variety of interviews that have been developed that have some validity to them, that can be used. And the idea behind an interview is that it gives you an in depth history of the challenging behavior, and the individual's development and skills. It might help to clarify some issues about daily routines, communication skills, and patterns of behavior. It can also give us information about the context of the behavior, and where it's most likely to occur based on people's recollection. And sometimes that can be really helpful at assessing, what I'll get into later, that are called setting events, which are things that make the behavior more likely to happen in response to trigger. So he's sick on

days where he has more problem behaviors, he didn't sleep well, on days before, he has probably more problem behaviors.

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And I'll spend more time talking about that. But just think of a day when you haven't had your coffee. Or if you're healthier than I am your morning run. And on those days, you might be more likely to snap at someone when they present you with the tasks to do that you weren't expecting, then on a day that you had coffee or you ran if you don't drink coffee.

13:54

And so indirect assessments are good ways to find out about those hidden variables that affect behavior. And to begin to think about how the current environment is affecting the behavior. Technically, you could use indirect assessments as your all of the tools that you use, according to special ed law. It is not best practice to do that. And generally, our research says that there are some real negatives to using those, and some strengths and weaknesses to those. So let me touch on them briefly.

14:29

The strengths of indirect assessments like interviews and checklist is our that they're easy to administer. And they don't take a lot of time, which, you know, we could say that that could be very easily overwhelmed by the negatives. But in all reality, getting something done is more useful than not being able to get an assessment done. The more skilled that the interviewer, or the interpreter is, the stronger the result. But regardless, it takes significantly less time to interview someone and see than to do a whole observation and get enough data to analyze. They do provide context. And that's one of the biggest advantages. And the reason that I list them and include them in this process. I don't see them as a standalone step. I see them as "now I know where I need to do my observations." "Now I know what I need to set up in the environment to make the behavior maybe go off and see if it's reliable in that way" They may tell us more about the individual; they may tell us what their strengths are or their weaknesses. They may give us some of those hidden variables. We might be able to develop some initial hypotheses about the functions from them.

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But they also tell you something about the reporter. And this is important because you have to factor that into the equation of the context in which the behavior is happening. If the person is displaying significant anger towards the student that you're assessing, that probably tells you

something about the context in which it's happening. If the person indicates that the behavior is not that big a deal, that probably tells you something else.

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I once interviewed a student about his own behavior and the way he said things was more informative to me than the actual information he provided. So when I asked him why it might be helpful for his teachers to like him, he replied, because that is the grease that makes the world go round. Interesting answer didn't really give me the information that I wanted. But it did tell me that he didn't really have a clear understanding of why that was important. And that was a piece of his autism.

16:35

Similarly, I had another student who was completing a self checklist about his own behavior. But he refused to fill it out, because he wasn't supposed to share personal information with strangers. We went back and forth. And we ended up destroying the checklist form that he had filled out, so that he couldn't see, I couldn't see the answers that he had written and erased. And when he asked "Well, you're just gonna throw away, why did it have to do it in the first place?" The whole interaction was much more informative for me than the actual checklist ever would have been.

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There are some really significant negatives about indirect assessment, that are the reasons that you don't want to use them as your only tool. They depend on the reliability of the reporter. When you ask someone to tell you about something, you are seeing things through their not just through their eyes, but through their perceptions, their memory, and possibly through their bias, you're seeing their vision and their memory of how things occur. Consequently, indirect assessment because it asked someone to tell you about something that happened, is very susceptible to bias and bad memory. Trying to remember something is hard enough; trying to remember something when the questions asked in a certain way is even more difficult.

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And so I bring my biases to the interview. I might tell you that the kid is just mean, and that he always has a problem behavior during PE. And maybe it's just that I really notice it when he does. And that's not an accurate statement. Your observational data may prove both those statements wrong, but it does tell me a lot about the people that are part of the context that I will be working with.

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Also, indirect assessments historically have a very low reliability and validity. Their reliability, particularly for the checklists, can be as low as 50%. And that's basically chance. That's basically saying half the time it's right, half the time it's wrong. It doesn't mean they're not useful; it just means we have to be very careful that they are not our main thing that we're relying for information on.

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Generally, if an interview is conducted by somebody who has experience and knows what they're trying to look for, and get information about that interviews may be more reliable, because we can probe and get answers in a way that you can't with a checklist. But again, because everything comes with a bias, we have to be very careful in our interpretation. And finally, they don't give us a definitive hypothesis. Indirect assessment, because we aren't manipulating the environment or observing anything, we really can't say that this causes this. We can't say for sure that giving them a math problem causes or triggers challenging behavior. We can say that's possible. But without observing a direct demonstration repeatedly, we can't say that's a clear relationship. So our results may not be as accurate. And you really don't want to go through all this work, just to have something that doesn't give you the information that you need.

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So that brings us to our most important step, which is the direct assessment of behavior. Typically, this involves taking data while we're observing the student in the natural environment, or in an environment in which we may be manipulating some of the variables to see if the behavior occurs or increases or decreases. This is the true crux of most FBAs because data needs to be objective, clear and useful, but also not take up so much time that it interferes with keeping students engaged and learning.

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And that's the easy part. Really, except you say, it's not so easy. You're right, it's not. So to make the most of our time, we're going to want to make sure that the data that's being collected is the data we actually need to use. And that will help us figure out what to do. So taking data to have data is definitely not what we are after, it has to help us figure out the function. And if it doesn't, you don't have time for that.

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And that is why I am going to wait and talk about data collection and direct observation in our next episode, when I have more time to really talk about how we can make work in the classroom, because we need to make sure we've got the right data. But we also need to make sure that we can continue to run our classrooms. And so we'll talk a lot about that in Episode 10 next week.

21:12

So I hope that this gives you some good ideas, definitely go to [AutismClassroomResources.com/episode9](https://AutismClassroomResources.com/episode9) to get downloads of some of the tools that I've talked about today. You can also download a transcript there as well. If you have enjoyed the podcast, I'd love it if you tell a friend; that would be awesome. And if you are looking for more information about diving into behavioral problem solving, we have a whole course on it in the Special Educator Academy. The Special Educator Academy is an entire online membership site that provides support, information and professional development specifically for special educators. So it's kind of the podcasts on steroids. And we have an entire full day, six, eight hour. It's an eight hour course in behavioral problem solving in the academy that you can join and we have a 7- day free trial. So if you're interested in that, go to [specialeducatoracademy.com](https://specialeducatoracademy.com). Thanks so much for taking the time to spend this 20 minutes with me. Have a great week and hopefully I'll see you again in our next episode.