

Beyond FERBs: Building Clinically Meaningful Treatment Plans

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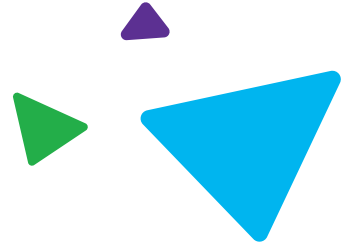


About the Presenter:



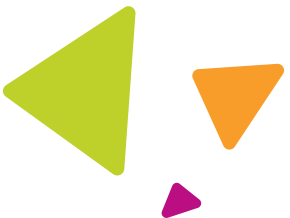
- Michelle Boutron, MS, BCBA, MBA, LBS
 - Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) since 2014
 - Former Special Education Teacher
 - Current IBHS- Autism Care Manager
 - Experience across school, clinic, home, and community-based behavioral health settings
 - Passionate about advancing compassionate, person-centered, and evidence-informed care

Learning objectives:



By the end of this training, participants will be able to:

- Differentiate functionally equivalent replacement behavior (FERBS) from general skill acquisition goals.
- Identify function-based replacement behaviors that meet the same need as the behavior of concern.
- Evaluate goals for social significance.
- Develop measurable, meaningful treatment goals.
- Use compassionate, person-centered documentation to demonstrate clinical reasoning and support medical necessity.



Our Why

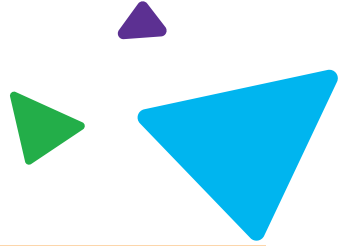


“Meaningful treatment is not solely about the behaviors we change, but whether those changes improve the person’s quality of life.

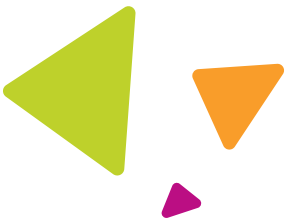
Compassionate care is responsive, collaborative, and grounded in humility.”

Penney et al. 2023.

Shared Ethical Principles:

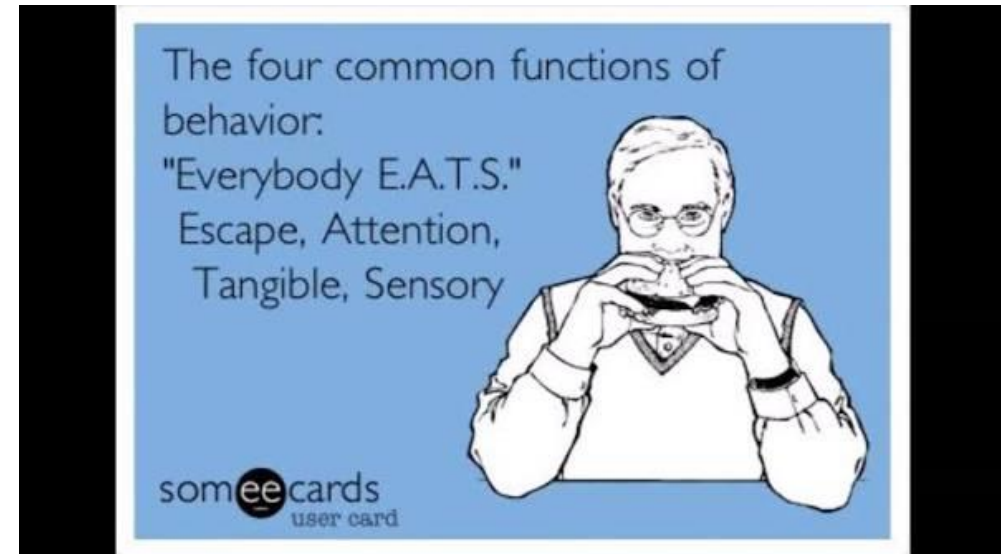


Ethics Code for Behavior Analyst:	NASW code of Ethics:	ACA Code of Conduct:
3.01 Responsibility to Clients	1.01 Commitment to Clients	A.1.a. Primary Responsibility
1.05 Practicing within Scope of Competence	1.04 Competence	C.2. Professional Competence
1.07 Cultural Responsiveness and Diversity	1.05 Cultural Competence	A.2.c. Developmental and Cultural Sensitivity
2.09 Involving Clients and Stakeholders	1.02 Self-Determination	A.1.d. Support Network Involvement
2.11 Obtaining Informed Consent	1.03 Informed Consent	E.3 Informed Consent in Assessment



Behavior has Meaning

- **Behavior is a form of communication:**
 - Escape or avoid demands, situations, environment, people
 - Gain attention (positive or negative)
 - Access preferred items, activities, or experiences
 - Sensory (automatic) needs
- **Before labeling a behavior as “challenging,” ask:**
 - What is the individual communicating?
 - What function does this behavior serve?
 - What unmet need or skill deficit might this behavior represent?



Let's Practice:

- What's the Function?
- Type the function in the chat: E- Escape, A- Attention, T- Tangible, S- Sensory

Scenario	Function
1. A child screams until the tablet is returned.	?
2. A learner rocks while waiting in the line with no social consequence?	?
3. A learner throws a worksheet after difficult math problem are presented.	?
4. A learner repeatedly jokes and classmates laugh.	?

A 5-Step Approach to Replacing Challenging Behavior

- Five-Step Framework from McGuire & Meadan (2022).



- Effective intervention requires a systematic, function-based approach that:
 - Identifies the behavior of concern
 - Determines why the behavior occurs
 - Selects a functionally equivalent replacement behavior (FERB)
 - Explicitly teaches the new skill
 - Reinforces and monitors meaningful behavior change over time

Step 1: Define the Challenging Behavior

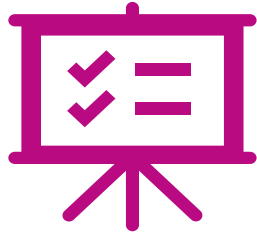
- Why does defining behavior matter?

A clear operational definition helps:

- Establish a shared understanding among team members.
- Collect reliable and accurate data.
- Identify patterns across settings.
- Select appropriate interventions.
- Measure meaningful progress over time.



What makes an operational definition?



An operational definition should be:

Observable

Measurable

Objective

Clear enough that two independent observers
would identify the same behavior



Example:

Behavior: Unsafe climbing

Operational definition: any instance of climbing
onto counters, fences, or other elevated surfaces
not intended for standing or climbing.

Examples: standing on tables, climbing a
bookshelf, climbing a playground fence.

Non-examples: climbing stairs, sitting on a chair,
using playground equipment as intended.

Common Problem: One Goal, Too Many Behaviors



- Broad definition
 - Aggression: any instance of hitting, kicking, leaving the assigned area, throwing objects, damaging property, yelling, verbal aggression, or refusing to follow instructions.
- Why Is This a Problem?
 - These are different behaviors that may:
 - Present different levels of risk
 - Serve different functions
 - Require different interventions
- Better Approach
 - Define and measure each clinically significant behavior separately:
 - Aggression: Hitting, kicking, biting, or scratching another person.
 - Leaving designated area: leaving instructional area without permission.
 - Property destruction: breaking, tearing, or damaging objects

ABC Data Collection

- Antecedents - what happens before the behavior?
- Behavior - what does the individual do?
- Consequences - what happens immediately after the behavior?

Student Name:			Date:			
A-B-C Data Sheet						
TIME	SETTING	STAFF	ANTECEDENT What happened before the behavior?	BEHAVIOR Describe the behavior	CONSEQUENCE What were the results/ reactions?	COMMENTS
When did the behavior take place?	Where did the behavior take place?	Who was present when behavior occurred?	• What did you say? • What was happening in the environment?	Be Objective! What did the behavior look + sound like REMOVE YOUR EMOTIONS	• What was said? • how did you re direct or NOT?	Anything that you think is significant!

ABC example

McGuire and Meadan

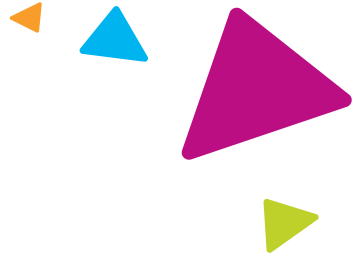
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Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
Students are given books to read	Maya yells loudly at Tonya to move away from her	Ms. Turner tells Maya to take a break with Mr. Michaels
Students are asked to work with a peer to complete a worksheet	Maya yells at Ms. Turner that she doesn't want to work with her partner	Ms. Turner tells Maya to wait in the hall and she will talk to her after the activity is over
Students are given a math test	Maya yells at Ms. Turner that she hates math	Ms. Turner tells Maya to go see the principal
Students are playing a math game with a partner	Maya yells at her partner, telling her she is stupid	Ms. Turner tells Maya to go to the calm down corner

Figure 1. Example ABC data collection.

Let's Practice

Step 1: Identify the ABCs



- Directions:

Read the scenario below. Identify the Antecedent, Behavior, and Consequence.

- Case Scenario:

Jordan is a 9-year-old learner who enjoys science and typically participates well in group activities. During language arts, the teacher announces that students will take turns reading a passage aloud to the class. When it is Jordan's turn, the teacher places the book on the desk and says, "Go ahead and begin reading the first paragraph." Jordan looks down at the book, quietly says, "I can't do this," and, after a few seconds, throws the book onto the floor, pushes his chair, and walks toward the classroom door. The teacher tells Jordan to step into the hallway with the classroom aide while the rest of the class continues reading. Approximately 10 minutes later, Jordan returns to class and completes only the last two questions of the assignment with adult support.

Step 2: Identify the function of Behavior

- The purpose of collecting the data is to identify why the behavior occurs.
- A functional hypothesis is developed by analyzing patterns in:
 - Antecedents- what happens before the behavior?
 - Behavior- what does the individual do?
 - Consequences- what happens immediately after the behavior?



Step 3: Identify a Functionally Equivalent Replacement Behaviors (FERB)

- Key Principles:
 - Observable and Measurable
 - Easier (or at least as easy) than the challenging behavior
 - Already within the learner's current repertoire or explicitly taught
 - Reinforced by the same outcomes (function) as the challenging behavior
- Ask yourself Four Questions:
 1. Is this an actual behavior? (Dead Man Test)
 2. Can the learner already, do it?
 3. Does it serve the same function?
 4. Can it realistically replace the challenging behavior?



Examples of Replacement Behaviors:



McGuire and Meadan

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Attention	
Replacement behaviors should teach the student:	Forms of attention:
- How to appropriately gain attention - When it is appropriate to seek attention - What to do if attention cannot be provided quickly	- High fives/elbow bumps - Short conversation - Verbal praise
Examples:	
- Teach the student to gently tap a peer on the shoulder - Teach the student to raise their hand before talking in class - Teach the student to ask to deliver a note to a preferred staff member	
Escape/Avoid	
Replacement behaviors should teach the student how to:	Forms of escape/avoidance:
- Appropriately escape/avoid an activity or task - Request an opportunity to escape/avoid an activity or task	- Sitting in a bean bag - Removing work 2 minute word search
Examples:	
- Teach the student to ask for a break or use a break card system - Teach the student to ask for a walk or drink at the water fountain - Teach the student to ask for more time (e.g., 2 more minutes) to engage in an activity	
Tangible	
Replacement behaviors should teach students:	Forms of tangible:
- How to appropriately request a desired item - When it is appropriate to request a desired item - How to accept "no" as a response (when first teaching the replacement behavior the item should be provided when requested)	- Preferred activity - A toy a peer has and the student also requested - Preferred location in the school (e.g., music room)
Examples:	
- Teach the student to make a request for a preferred item or activity - Teach the student to ask for a turn - Teach the student to ask for an alternative activity/item when it is unavailable	
Sensory	
Replacement behaviors should meet or fulfill the same needs or input the behavior serves in a safer and more ethical way	Few behaviors serve a sensory function, be sure data support this hypothesized function
Examples:	
- Teach student incompatible behaviors - Hand biting → hands in pockets - Hair pulling → pulling fuzzies off a toy	

Figure 2. Replacement behaviors by function.

FERB vs. Skill Acquisition Goal

Challenging Behavior:	Function:	FERB:	Skill Acquisition:
Leaving the classroom	Escape	Request to go for a walk	Remain engaged during instruction, complete task, follow 2 step directions, increase request, etc.
Yelling/Screaming	Attention	Raise hand/Tap adult	Waiting goal, social skills, follow routines, imitation skills, etc.
Skin picking	Automatic	Use a sensory manipulation item or engage in a competing response that provides similar input	Complete assigned work, increase play skills, etc.
Hitting adults	Tangible/Access	Request for item, use picture icon to request for item	Wait, use full sentences, turn-taking, etc.

Step 4: Teach the Replacement Behavior

- Effective Instruction Includes:

1. Model

- Demonstrate the replacement behavior.
- Explain when, how, and why to use it.

2. Practice

- Create multiple contrived and naturally occurring opportunities throughout the day.
- Use prompting, modeling, shaping, role-play, and feedback.
- Teach the skill before the challenging behavior occurs.

3. Reinforce

- Deliver immediate reinforcement.
- Provide behavior-specific praise.
- Ensure the replacement behavior has access to the same outcome.



Step 5: Reinforce the Replacement Behavior

- Reinforce the FERB
 - Reinforce immediately and consistently
 - Ensure reinforcement matches the identified function
 - Use behavior-specific praise
 - Make FERB easier and more effective than the challenging behavior
- Monitor & Adjust
 - Review data continuously
 - Evaluate learner progress regularly
 - Modify intervention when progress is limited
 - Let data, not timelines, guide clinical decisions



Let's Practice:

- In the chat, match each statement with the correct step in the Five- Step Framework.

Scenario	Five- Step Framework
1. ABC data shows the learner leaves class to avoid the work.	A. Define the behavior.
2. The team clearly describes what “elopement” looks like, so everyone measures it the same way.	B. Identify the Function.
3. The learner is taught to request to go for a walk instead of leaving the classroom.	C. Select a functionally equivalent replacement behavior (FERB).
4. Staff practice, prompt and model the new communication skill.	D. Reinforce the FERB.
5. Staff immediately honor appropriate “I need a walk” request to strength the new skill.	E. Teach the FERB.

Social Significance: Selecting Goals That Truly Matter



- Assessment identifies many potential goals and targets. Clinical judgment determines which goals deserve intervention.
- Before selecting goals, ask:
 - Will this improve safety or health?
 - Will this increase independence?
 - Will this improve communication or self-advocacy?
 - Will this increase meaningful participation at home, school, or in the community?
 - Does this reflect the learner's and family priorities?
 - Will this improve the learner's quality of life?

What Type of Intervention Is Needed?

- When a concern is identified, determine what type of intervention is most appropriate.

Clinical Concern	Primary Intervention
Dangerous or significantly interfering behavior	Behavior Reduction Goal(s)
Missing or emerging skills	Skill Acquisitions
Environmental mismatch or barrier	Environmental Modifications

- The intervention should match the clinical need. Not every concern should become a behavior reduction goal.

FERB vs. Skill Acquisition Goals

- A FERB directly replaces challenging behavior by serving the same function.
- A Skill Acquisition Goal builds broader abilities that promote long-term independence and quality of life.

Challenging Behavior	Function	FERB	Skill Acquisition Goal
Aggression	Escape	Request break, help, more time using learner's preferred communication method.	Increase self-advocacy, emotional regulation, task persistence.
Property destruction	Escape/Attention	Communicate frustration and request support before escalation.	Develop coping skills, problem-solving, functional communication.
Crying	Tangible/ Escape	Communicate wants and needs using visual, AAC, and gestures.	Expand functional communication, increase tolerance, waiting.
Hitting Peers	Attention/ Escape	State preferences, teach to set boundaries, negotiate, and request adult support.	Develop conflict resolution, social skills, etc.

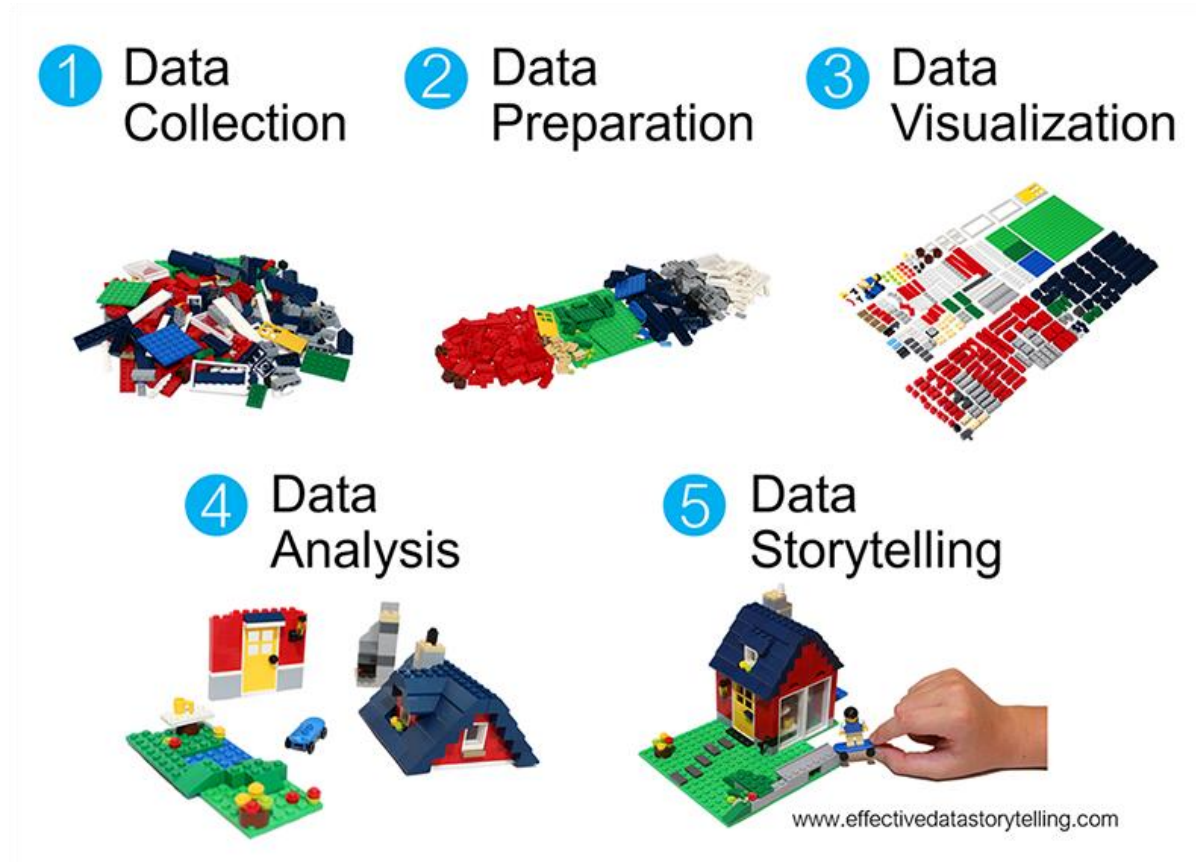
Measure What Matters

- High-quality treatment goals are:
 - Observable
 - Measurable
 - Individulized
 - Socially Significant
 - Meaningful to the Individual and Family

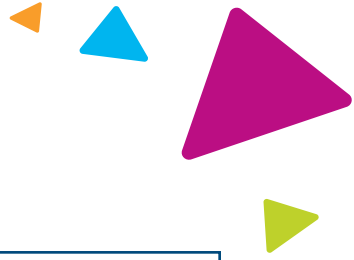


Graphs Tell a Story

Data becomes meaningful when they guide clinical decisions.



Documentation Tells the Person's Story



Person-Centered

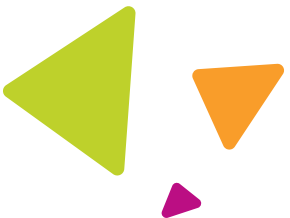
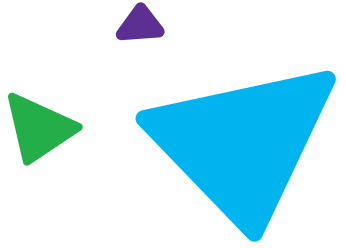
- Strengths, preferences, and priorities
- Individual and family voice
- Meaningful daily-life outcomes

Clinically Grounded

- Objective data
- Response to Intervention
- Barriers, progress, and next steps

Make Clinical Reasoning Visible

- Strong Documentation answers:
 1. What does the data show?
 2. Why does it matter?
 3. What happens next?



Reflection & Takeaway:

“One thing I will do differently after today’s training is ...”



Beyond FERBs



The goal is not simply to reduce behavior.



The goal is to help people communicate, participate, build independence, and experience a better quality of life.



Understand the function.



Teach meaningful alternatives.



Measure what matters.



Document the person's story.

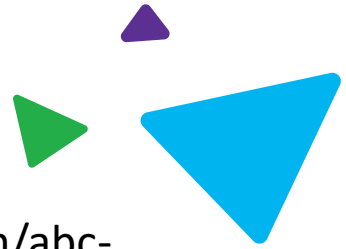
One More Resource:



**THE
SEPTEMBER
26TH**
P R O J E C T

- The September 26th
- Safety Assessment- (SAFE-T)

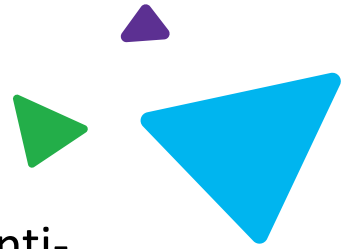
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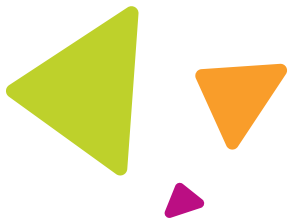
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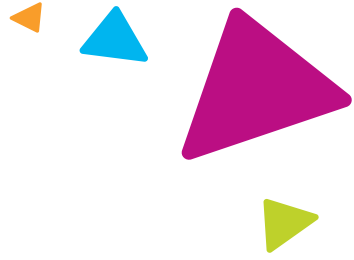
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