Chapter 3
Functional Assessment of School-Based Concerns

George H. Noell

Functional assessment is a relatively well-established model for identifying environmental factors that maintain or suppress an individual’s behavior and linking assessment findings to treatment. The development of functional assessment has legal and ethical implications for clinical practice with children. At the legal level, a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) has been codified as a civil rights and/or due process protection for children protected by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 1997). Specifically, children who are identified as disabled under IDEA and who are subjected to disciplinary sanctions such as suspension are entitled to a FBA. The results of the FBA are then to guide revision of the student’s Individualized Education Plan so that it more effectively addresses his or her current educational needs. Given that children receiving clinical services may be disabled under IDEA and may also be at risk for suspension or expulsion, it is crucially important for clinicians to understand the protections afforded to children under IDEA.

The legal mandates for functional assessment apply to schools rather than clinicians. The clinician’s primary role in cases where functional assessment is legally mandated is likely to be advocating for the client’s civil rights and collaborating with educators to ensure that a complete and informative assessment is completed. However, ethical and practical considerations suggest a broader use of functional assessment in clinical practice with children beyond those instances in which it is statutorily required. The single most important consideration is that functional assessment is the most strongly empirically supported method of developing...
treatments for problematic behaviors (Kratochwill & McGivern, 1996). Additionally, function based treatments have been found to be more effective than those that are not in the few comparative studies available to date (Carr & Durand, 1985; Taylor & Miller, 1997). Where it is applicable, functional assessment is entirely consistent with clients’ proposed rights to pretreatment assessment, effective treatment, and ongoing evaluation (see Van Houten et al., 1988). The appropriate use of functional assessment is also consistent with the American Psychological Association’s (1992) ethical code’s emphasis on the use of scientifically and professionally derived knowledge as the basis for making decisions.

Functional assessment is a conceptual model that was derived from operant principles of learning and behavior. Within this general framework, data can be drawn from sources that are indirect, descriptive, and experimental (Horner, 1994). Indirect assessment is the gathering of information through interviews and/or rating scales from informants who have witnessed the behavior. A descriptive assessment is completed by directly observing in the natural context, recording the behavior, its antecedents, and its consequences (Bijou, Peterson, & Ault, 1968; Lerman & Iwata, 1993; Sasso et al., 1992). A functional analysis (i.e., an experimental assessment) is conducted by implementing a series of planned test conditions within a single subject experimental design. Functional analysis is the most powerful and widely researched functional assessment tool.

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN FUNCTIONAL ASSESSMENT AND FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

When discussing function based clinical tools it is useful to clarify the distinction between the general application of functional analysis and the narrower use of functional analysis within functional assessment. Clarity in definition reduces the risk of miscommunication. Functional analysis is the experimental examination of the effect of an independent variable on a dependent variable (Johnston & Pennypacker, 1993; Skinner, 1953). In this general usage any experimentally controlled evaluation of the effect of one variable upon another is a functional analysis. An immense functional analysis literature exists, but most of these studies are not functional assessments as the term typically is used.

Most published functional analyses are evaluations of a treatment. Even though evaluating treatment is the most important application of functional analysis, it is not synonymous with functional assessment. Functional assessment attempts to identify the antecedents and consequences that maintain or suppress a behavior prior to intervention (Repp, 1994). Functional assessment is used to identify the naturally occurring factors that set the occasion for and maintain the target concern. In contrast, functional analysis is a general case experimental approach that can be used to evaluate the function of variables that do not occur naturally (e.g., a self-monitoring treatment package) as well as potential maintaining variables. As the behavior modification and psychopharmacology literatures readily demonstrate, an independent variable need not be derived from a naturally occurring maintaining variable to change behavior.

Functional assessment provides a means of developing interventions that have an increased probability of success, act on naturally occurring contingencies, and have an increased probability of fitting into the environmental context (Iwata, Vollmer, & Zarcone, 1990). The development of internally valid procedures for evaluating environment – behavior relationships is the most important technical contribution to a function-based model of assessment and treatment. Functional analysis is relatively unique in its extensive history of application as both a basic research procedure and as a model for assessment and treatment (Baer, Wolf, &