



Evidence-based Practices for Individuals with Autism, Intellectual Disability, and Related Disabilities

Functional Communication Training



Robert Pennington



Melissa Tapp



Amy Clausen

University of North Carolina Charlotte

Many individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) engage in challenging behaviors that may result in injury to themselves and others (Jang et al., 2011). As a result, these individuals are more likely to require emergency hospital services (Vohra et al., 2016), experience social isolation (Locke et al., 2010), and be precluded from access to typical educational and community environments (Lauderdale-Litton et al., 2013). Fortunately, researchers have demonstrated the effectiveness of strategies for teaching individuals to use alternative behaviors in lieu of problem behavior to access reinforcers. One strategy, *functional communication training* (FCT; Carr & Durand, 1985), involves teaching a more efficient functional communication response (FCR) that produces that same reinforcer as a problem behavior. FCT has garnered extensive research support (Chezan et al., 2018) and has been deemed an evidence-based practice for individuals with ASD (Wong et al., 2015).

Implementing Functional Communication Training

The effective implementation of FCT requires systematic staff training and the ongoing monitoring of implementation fidelity. Generally, FCT involves five steps:

- (1) functional behavior assessment (FBA),
- (2) identification of an FCR,
- (3) training the FCR,
- (4) differential reinforcement, and
- (5) schedule thinning.

In the next section, each component is described and steps for implementation are provided (see Figure 1).

Functional Behavior Assessment

Functional behavior assessment (FBA) is a process for identifying reinforcers that maintain problem behavior and involves the use of one or more methods, including interviews, rating scales, direct observations, and functional analysis. The FBA process helps the intervention team refine their definitions of problem behavior, clarify under what conditions a problem behavior is most likely to occur, and identify events (i.e., reinforcers) that increase the likelihood of the problem behavior occurring again. Once a reinforcer (i.e., function) is identified, the intervention team then selects an FCR that will produce the same reinforcer (e.g., attention, escape).

Identification of an FCR

A variety of communicative forms can serve as an FCR (e.g., vocalization, picture, manual sign). When selecting an FCR, practitioners should consider several critical factors. First, the FCR must require less effort than the problem behavior. Second, the skills required to emit an FCR should be within a learner's repertoire (e.g., pointing to a picture) or easily taught. Third, the adults within a learner's environment should be taught to recognize and immediately reinforce the FCR. Finally, when possible, the team should select FCRs that are consistent with the learner's current communication system and are socially acceptable in natural environments.

Training the FCR

The intervention team must identify who will be responsible for teaching the FCR and the location where instruction will occur. When possible, teaching should be conducted during typical daily activities and in the natural environment. In some cases, a learner may require more opportunities or teaching trials to learn the FCR than available in a natural setting. In that case, the instructor may conduct teaching trials in a different setting (e.g., resource room, separate area). When teaching in a controlled setting, the instructor should use materials and reinforcers similar to those available in the natural environment. It is important to note that while training during natural routines promotes generalization, contriving additional opportunities to prompt and reinforce the communicative response may lead to quicker acquisition of the skill.

To teach the FCR, the instructor first must observe the learner's interest in a reinforcer (e.g., reaching for an item, emitting a behavior that is typically a precursor to problem behavior) or temporarily block access to a reinforcer (e.g., withholding an iPad). The instructor then prompts (e.g., provides a model) the learner to emit the FCR. Instruction continues until the learner emits the FCR without prompting.

Differential Reinforcement

Once the FCR is acquired, it must be reinforced consistently. Additionally, it is important to withhold or reduce the quality of reinforcers, as much as possible, for the challenging behavior.

This can be difficult when the behavior may cause harm (e.g., aggression, self-injury). In this case, the intervention team must plan additional procedures to ensure the safety of the learner and those around them.

Schedule Thinning

Finally, when first conducting FCT, it is important to honor each FCR. However, it is not feasible to provide continuous reinforcement indefinitely. A plan must be made to thin the schedule of reinforcement after the individual has acquired the FCR. Five methods of schedule thinning have been described in the literature: (1) delay schedules, (2) chain schedules, (3) multiple schedules, (4) response restriction, and (5) tolerance training (Hanley et al., 2014; Muharib & Pennington, 2019). Generally, these procedures teach the learner to discriminate between times when their requests will and will not be reinforced and to tolerate increasingly longer periods of time between their use of an FCR and access to the requested reinforcer.

Conclusion

Functional communication training is a powerful strategy for decreasing learners' problem behavior while simultaneously increasing their communication skills. When implemented accurately and with careful consideration of the factors described above, FCT can have a positive impact on the lives of learners of all ages and skill levels. Further, researchers have demonstrated that a range of stakeholders, including parents, can be trained to implement FCT (Gerow et al., 2018). ■



Figure 1. FCT procedures.

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