

Simple Steps to Functional Communication

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Reimagining Human Service Systems

Functional Communication Training (FCT) is an evidence-based strategy that involves replacing a problem behavior with a functionally equivalent communication strategy (e.g. sign, gesture, vocalization, etc.). This new communication strategy, a.k.a. replacement behavior, will now serve the same function that the problem behavior had been serving.

Five Steps to Functional Communication

1

Define the Problem Behavior

Describe precisely what you see and/or hear when the behavior is occurring. Avoid using words that indicate emotions (e.g. angry, frustrated, etc.) or intentions (e.g. "to get his way", "to avoid work", etc.). Ask others who are familiar with the individual to describe the problem behavior. A good definition will be written so that an unfamiliar person could identify an occurrence of the problem behavior after reading the definition.

2

Determine the Problem Behavior

Once the problem behavior has been clearly defined, it is essential that the function of the behavior be assessed. The most basic process for determining behavior function is to gather A-B-C Data (antecedent-behavior-consequence). After an episode of the problem behavior, write down the antecedent - what occurred immediately before the behavior, the behavior- and the consequence- what occurred immediately after the behavior.

- Reviewing the A-B-C's will show that the problem behavior serves at least one of the four functions:
- Escape- the individual gets out of a task/activity or an interaction,
- Tangible- the individual gains access to an item or activity,
- Sensory- the individual receives sensory (e.g. tactile, vestibular, visual, etc.) input,
- Attention- the individual receives attention from another person.

3

Define a Replacement Behavior

In an FCT program, the replacement behavior is a form of communication that the individual will be taught to replace the problem behavior. This behavior will serve the same function as the problem behavior. The replacement behavior needs to be:

- easier to perform than the problem behavior
- something that the person can learn quickly, and
- understandable to others

4

Teach the Replacement Behavior

Arrange situations for the person to engage in the replacement behavior. For example: if the function of the problem behavior is to get access to a preferred toy, make sure the person can see the toy and instruct him/her to perform the replacement behavior. For early learners with limited communication skills, additional prompts such as hand-over-hand guidance to perform a sign or point to a picture card will likely be needed. To establish the replacement behavior, it is best that the individual be reinforced each time s/he communicates a request for the toy.

It is important that the problem behavior be placed on extinction. In other words, the problem behavior will no longer get the individual access to the preferred toy, only the new communication skill will serve that function.

5

Maintain the Replacement Behavior

Once the individual is communicating consistently and no longer engaging in the problem behavior. Gradually begin to fade the reinforcement. This may mean that the individual does not get the preferred toy every time s/he asks for it or s/he may have to wait longer before getting the toy. Fading reinforcement too quickly may lead to a recurrence of the problem behavior.

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