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Functional Communication Training

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What is Functional Communication Training (FCT)

- Functional Communication Training (FCT) is a method that focuses on replacing inappropriate behavior with appropriate communication that achieves the same function.

- FCT is used to teach new communicative behaviors that replace maladaptive and interfering behaviors.

- FCT typically involves teaching and reinforcing appropriate replacements while not paying attention and not providing reinforcement for interfering behaviors

Why do we use it?

- FCT facilitates functional and generalized communication

- Learners are taught developmentally appropriate forms of communication

- Increasing independence and quality of life

- Improving social skills

- FCT is relatively easy to implement and low-cost intervention

What are some behaviors we can target using FCT

Reducing:

- Physical aggression
- Tantrums
- Screaming
- Running away
- Self-injurious behaviors
- Property destruction

Increasing:

- Verbal communication
- Verbal requests
- Signing
- Using communication cards
- Using AAC
- Other mediums of communication

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Assessments and factors to consider before using FCT

- Assessment of pre-requisite skills, including verbal/non-verbal communication skills, motor skills, joint attention, etc.

- Assessment of learner's methods of communication

- Consider main communication partners and environment

Pre-requisite skills necessary

Select the correct communication medium

- PECS

- AT devices

- Signing (ASL or BSL)

- Simplified communication app

- Communication apps

- Verbal expressive language

Skills

- Joint attention

- Receptive skills

- Discrimination

- Scanning

- Label (vocabulary)

- Imitation

- Waiting

Step by step instructions

1. Identifying interfering behavior

2. Identify function

3. Identify replacement behaviors

4. Develop supporting materials

5. Teach replacement behavior using the most appropriate teaching procedures

6. Reinforce replacement behaviors

7. Put interfering behavior on extinction / remove reinforcement/not pay attention

8. Prompting for replacement

9. Shaping responses

10. Fading prompts, increase time before reinforcement

11. Generalize

Step 1. Identify the interfering behavior

- This is an inappropriate behavior that serves a communicative function and is being reinforced (even if unintentionally)

- This behavior usually occurs on a regular basis because of reinforcement

- Examples:
  - Screaming
  - Hitting
  - Falling on the floor
  - Running away

Step 2. Identify the function of interfering behavior

- Functions of behavior include:
  - Attention
  - Escape
  - Tangible
  - Sensory

Attention

- A person may engage in a certain behavior to gain some form of social attention or a reaction from other people.

- Example: a child might scream to get other people to look at them, laugh at them, play with them, hug them or scold them.

- The best way to not reinforce the behavior any further (and to decrease the behavior) would be to ignore the behavior and redirect to a task you can reinforce.

Escape

- Not all behaviors occur so the person can "obtain" something; many behaviors occur because the person wants to get away from something or avoid something altogether.

- Example: child might engage in aggressive behavior so his teachers stop running academic tasks with him or another child might engage in self-injury to avoid having to go outside to play with classmates.

- Having your student complete the original task and not allowing your student to 'escape' would be a good way to decrease the negative behavior.

Tangible

- Some behaviours occur so the person can obtain a tangible item or gain access to a desired activity.

- Example: someone might scream and shout until their parents buy them a new toy (tangible item) or bring them to the zoo (activity).

- Teaching your student to give up a reinforcing item would be key for this situation. It is very important to reinforce your student when they do give up the item appropriately.

Sensory (automatic)

- They function only to give the person some form of internal sensation that is pleasing or to remove an internal sensation that is displeasing (e.g. pain).

- Example: Self- Stim.

- Some ways to reduce this behavior would be redirection or to replace with an appropriate behavior instead.

- Functions of Behavior - Autism Therapy Video

Step 3. Identify replacement behavior

- Replacement behavior is an alternative appropriate behavior that serves the same function as interfering behavior

- It should consider the form of communication used by the child (signing, verbal communication, pictures, devices)

- It should initially require very low effort for the learner to perform replacement behavior

- It should also be recognized by multiple people in child's environment

Examples of replacement behaviors

- Alternative response can take a variety of forms
    - Vocalizations
    - Signs
    - Communication boards
    - Words or picture cards
    - Vocal output systems
    - Gestures

- When teaching conversational skills:
    - Short dialogues to longer ones
    - Topics of interest
    - Age appropriate

Examples of behaviors and functions

Interfering behavior	Function	Alternative replacement
Screaming	Tangible – get toy or food	Verbal request Signing for food or toy Using picture
Hitting	Attention – get attention from parent	Tapping on the hand Verbal calling
Throwing items	Escape – avoid task or activity, such as homework	Asking for a break
Self-stimulatory behaviors	Sensory stimulation	FCT is not usually used for self-stimulatory behaviors, except for behaviors which are disruptive or unsafe

Step 4. Develop supporting materials

- Developing cards

- Programming devices

- Creating communication books

- Consider environment where materials will be used

- Create opportunities for a replacement behavior to occur

Step 5. Teach replacement behaviors

- **Effective use of FCT includes**
  - Dense schedules of reinforcement
  - Decreased use of verbal prompts
  - Behavior reduction procedures
  - Schedule thinning
  - Modeling the language

- **FCT interventions typically involve several behavior change strategies in addition to teaching the alternative communication response**
  - Response prompting
  - Time-out
  - Physical restraint
  - Response blocking
  - Redirection
  - Extinction of problem behavior

- **FCT is also often used with other procedures, such as differential reinforcement**

Including FCT in behavioral intervention plan

1. Teach the Replacement behavior: include communication, social skills, prerequisite academic skills, self management

2. Improve the Antecedents or Environment: clear and specific rewards, rules or choices, model appropriate behavior, organization, time spent and other teaching strategies.

3. Adjusting the contingencies or consequences: Eliminate the consequences that formerly maintained the target behavior and provide reinforcement for the replacement behavior

Step 6. Reinforce replacement behaviors

- Provide reinforcement for performing replacement behavior immediately

- Reinforcement should fit the behavior. For example, reinforce verbal requests with requested items.

- Dense schedules of reinforcement

- Alternative communication response should produce the reinforcers that maintain the problem behavior on a continuous schedule of reinforcement at first

Step 7. Remove reinforcement for interfering behaviors

- **Behavior reduction procedures**
  - Effectiveness of FCT can be increased with the use of other procedures (in a treatment package to enhance the reduction of the undesired (problem) behaviors
    - Extinction procedure
    - Time-out procedure

- **Ensure you don't reinforce interfering behaviors (commonly it is ignored)**

- **Make interfering behaviors less efficient than replacement behaviors**

Step 8. Prompt

- Use the level of prompt that ensure performing replacement behavior by the learner

- Correct prompting level will depend on the learner

- Decrease use of verbal prompts
  - When the alternative communication response is being taught initially verbal prompts are often used
  - After the response is in the individual's repertoire the verbal prompts should be reduced and eliminated (if possible)
  - Assists in removing any prompt dependence

Step 9. Shape replacement behaviors

- Start with the easiest way for a learner to perform replacement behavior

- Gradually increase complexity of the response making it corresponding to the child's abilities

- Reinforce each next approximation of the target response

- For example, for teaching verbal request for a cookie you teach:
    - "Cookie"
    - "Want cookie"
   - "I want cookie"
    - "I want cookie, please"

Step 10. Fade prompt and thin reinforcement

- **Schedule thinning**
  - Thinning of the schedule on which the established communication response is reinforced is an important part of FCT
  - Should only be done after the alternative communication response is firmly in the individual's repertoire

- **Procedure for schedule thinning**
  - Used dense continuous schedule of reinforcement during initial teaching of alternative communication response
  - After the response is established, gradually thin the schedule
  - Suggest use of external cues to indicate when reinforcement is available

- **Fade prompts gradually to increase independence**

- **You can use time delay to identify correct level of prompts required**

Step 11. Plan for generalization

- Practice FCT in multiple settings and environments

- Practice with multiple individuals/communication partners

- Train all involved individuals react appropriately to functional communication

- Teach varied vocabulary where possible

Generalization:

Places | People | Materials | Vocabulary
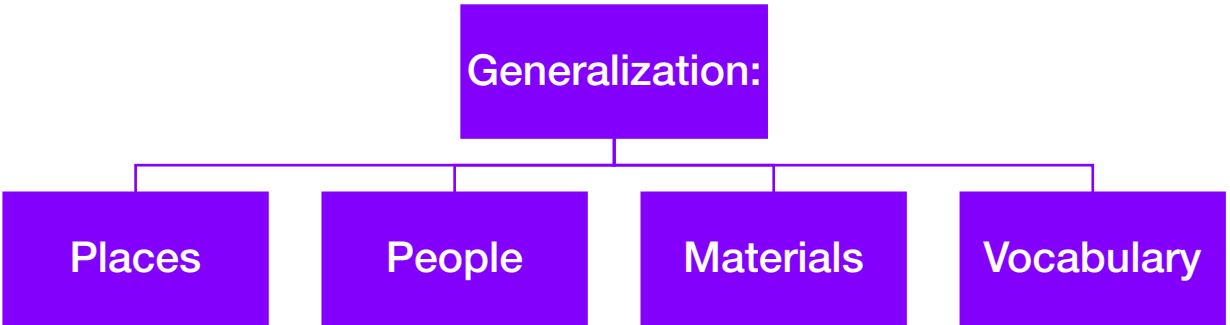
Troubleshooting

- If the child is not showing progress with FCT, consider the following:

- Consistency of using FCT in different setting and by different people

- If the function of the interfering behavior was identified correctly

- If the replacement behavior serves the same function as interfering behavior

- Appropriateness and consistency in using reinforcement by everyone involved

- Pre-requisite skills were identified correctly

Communication and Conversations

- Definition for conversation

- A talk, especially an informal one, between two or more people, in which news and ideas are exchanged.

- Measure using dialogues

Shaping up dialogues

1. Finding similar topics to talk about
2. Start with few then adding more
3. Start with child's interest
4. Modeling lots of functional communication

Keep in mind:

- How much pressure
- This is difficult
- Provide time
- Reinforcement for trying
- Use lots of FCT

Assess for conversation skills

- Prerequisite skills

- Joint attention & Play skills

- Paired liking to others

- Receptive skills &Intraverbal skills

- Reading (behavior cusp but not necessary)

- Scanning

- Non-verbal body language

- Turn taking and patterns

- Waiting

- Sharing

- Basic social skills (asking and answering questions)

Cases and scenarios (video)

- [How To: Intro to Functional Communication Video](#)

- Use video modeling for teaching Functional communication or conversation skills.

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Thank you!

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