Understanding individual student behaviour

> "Always assume that a motivation for a particular behaviour is positive but expressed in a negative way."
>
> – Richard L. Curwin and Allen N. Mendler,
> *Discipline with Dignity*

To effectively support students with behaviour disabilities and to help them develop new and more positive behaviours, teachers need to understand why students behave as they do. One effective way of understanding students' problem behaviour is to recognize that the behaviour has a function. In many instances, the behaviour allows students to obtain something they want or avoid something they do not want.

The same behaviour can have different functions for different students. For example, students may hit others in order to be left alone, or take something away from a classmate to get attention.

Research studies and evidence-based best practices have identified the following principles.[4]

- Behaviour is learned and therefore can be unlearned.

- Each student is unique and therefore requires an individualized approach based on the purpose or function of the student's behaviour.

- The first step of an intervention is to identify the purpose or function that the current behaviour serves.

- Behaviour is influenced by the type of reinforcements or other consequences received after the behaviour occurs.

- Teachers and school-based teams need observational data to determine the function of the behaviour and the effects of antecedents and consequences surrounding that behaviour.

- Teachers and school-based teams need to understand the function of behaviour in order to select appropriate teaching strategies.

- Altering the setting or environment may improve student behaviour.

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4. Adapted with permission from Karen Bain and Brenda Sautner, *BOATS: Behaviour, Observation, Assessment and Teaching Strategies*, 2nd ed. (Edmonton, AB: Special Education Council, The Alberta Teachers' Association, 2007), p. 4.

- Data collection is the basis for initial decision making as well as for continuously monitoring the programming.

- Teachers and school-based teams can enhance their competency and capacity for meeting the learning needs of students with behaviour disabilities by working through a process that consists of:
  – understanding and observing behaviours
  – implementing positive behaviour supports
  – matching appropriate teaching strategies to student needs.

Behaviour is learned

Students learn a pattern of behaviour through observation or through feedback and consequences.

Observation

Individuals may learn new behaviours by observing other people's behaviour, that is, through social learning or modelling. They see other people behaving in a certain way and imitate them. For example, Mary hears that the teacher excused other students for not handing in homework because they claimed to have forgotten it at home. So she uses a similar excuse. Or Barry's parents encourage hitting as a way of "standing up for yourself." So Barry responds to frustration with peers by physically lashing out.

Feedback and consequences

Students learn behaviours through the feedback and consequences they receive at home or school. Sometimes feedback or consequences unintentionally reinforce negative behaviours. For example, a teacher responds to a student who frequently calls out in class by giving him more attention, which is what he wants. Or students try to get sent out of class for disrupting the class in order to avoid a task or activity they dislike.

Functions of behaviour

All behaviour has a function. Often the function is to:

- obtain something (such as attention, activities, goods or control)
- avoid something (such as specific activities or social situations).

In addition, low tolerance for frustration may also contribute to problem behaviour.

Obtaining something

- Research shows that some people require very little attention from others while others require a great deal. Some students who are unable to obtain attention in appropriate ways resort to negative behaviours such as calling out in class, disrupting or hitting other students, or swearing.
- Students may become aggressive in order to obtain desired goods from other students.
- Students may intentionally display oppositional behaviour to gain control over their environment.

Avoiding something

- Students who do not like attention, or at least certain types of attention, act out or refuse to participate in order to avoid that attention.
- Students may display inappropriate behaviour in class to avoid doing a task or answering a question when they don't know the answer. They are more concerned about not looking "stupid" or "dumb" than about the consequences of their behaviour. Being disruptive sometimes gets them out of the class so they can avoid the situation for a while.
- Students may lie or cheat to avoid the unpleasant consequences of their negative behaviour.

Trigger events

In many cases, an event triggers an emotional reaction or problem behaviour.

Typical "fast" triggers in the immediate environment include:

- being asked to do something
- being told "no"
- receiving negative feedback or a negative consequence

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- being in stressful situations; for example, the teacher asks for an answer in class or the student is anxious about writing tests or being involved in large groups

- being near a person the student feels is adversarial

- the perception that someone said something or did something that is threatening or unpleasant

- overreacting to school work the student perceives as too difficult, too complex or irrelevant

- the teacher's absence.

"Slow triggers" that may result in negative behaviour at a later time include:

- family-related factors such as parental depression, family anger, ineffective parenting, separation and loss, or abuse

- medical and health issues such as lack of sleep, poor nutrition or the effects of medication

- social and community factors such as peer groups (including gangs) or extracurricular activities.

It can be difficult to identify the trigger event if you don't understand the student's past history or present developmental characteristics. Teachers might try asking the student to recall what he or she was thinking or feeling before becoming upset, but the student may not be able to respond in any helpful way.

The trigger may not be easily recognizable because it stems from:

- built-up frustration as the day progresses, resulting in increased fidgetiness, self-stimulation, or covering the ears or eyes

- specific sights, sounds or smells that the student finds irritating (e.g., loud noises such as a fire alarm or smells)

- sounds or smells that bring back memories of trauma such as abuse.

The escalation cycle

Some students have difficulty recognizing the events that trigger their problem behaviour and therefore have a limited ability to prevent their behaviour from escalating. Others may be able to recognize the escalation cycle but still choose to engage in inappropriate behaviour. School staff need to understand the escalation cycle and develop skills for dealing with volatile situations proactively.

The Escalation Cycle[5]
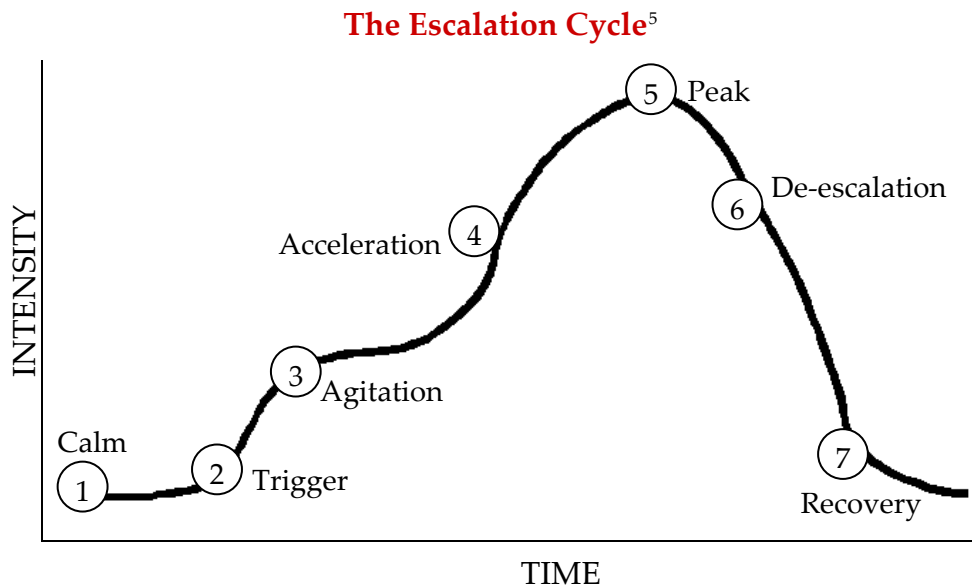
The best time to teach new or replacement behaviour is when the student is in the calm phase of the cycle. Students can practise this behaviour through role-playing and then use it in actual situations.

Sample strategies for de-escalating conflict situations

- *Use brief, simple stress-reduction techniques before responding to a student's remark or behaviour.*
  For example, take a deeper-than-normal breath and release it slowly. As an added benefit, this technique creates an additional moment to plan an appropriate response.

- *Respond to the student in a neutral, business-like, calm voice.*
  People often interpret their own emotional states from their own behavioural cues. Speaking calmly is more likely to help you believe that you are calm (and act like you are calm)—even when you are in the midst of a stressful situation.

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5. Reproduced with permission from Geoff Colvin, *Managing the Cycle of Acting-Out Behavior in the Classroom* (Eugene, OR: Behavior Associates, 2004), Figure 2.1, p. 12.

- *Keep responses brief.*
  Short responses give students less control over the interaction and can also prevent you from inadvertently rewarding negative behaviour with too much attention.

- *Use well-timed, supportive techniques to interrupt the escalation of student anger.*
  These types of tactics have the potential to redirect a potential confrontation into a productive conversation. Interrupting tactics should be positive and respectful, such as diverting students' attention from conflict by redirecting their attention to more positive topics or activities.

- *Try paraphrasing the essential points of the student's concerns.*
  Many students lack effective negotiation skills in dealing with adults. As a result, these students may become angry and defensive when they try to express a complaint to school staff—even when that complaint is well-founded. Show that you want to understand the student's concern by summing up the crucial points of that concern, using the student's own words. Use phrases such as, "Let me be sure that I understand you correctly …", "Are you telling me that …?", "It sounds to me like your concerns are …" Engaging in active listening by using paraphrasing demonstrates respect for the students' points of view and can also help improve their own understanding of the problem.

- *Use open-ended questions to better understand the problem situation and find possible solutions*.
  Pose who, what, where, when and how questions such as "What do you think made you angry when you were talking with Sam?" and "Where were you when you realized that you had misplaced your science book?" In general, avoid asking "why" questions because the student can perceive this as blaming (e.g., "Why did you get into that fight with Jerry?"). Some students may become even more frustrated when asked "why" questions because they may not be able to answer them.

- *Use nonverbal strategies to defuse potential confrontations.*
  When people get into arguments, they often unconsciously mirror the emotional posturing of the other. For example, pointing when the other person points, standing when the other person stands, and so on. To lower the tension when a student is visibly agitated, sit down next to the student (a less threatening posture) rather than standing over that student.

- *Ask the student, "Is there anything that we can work out at this time to earn your cooperation?"*
  Such a statement treats the student with dignity, models negotiation as a positive means for resolving conflict, and demonstrates that you want to keep the student in the classroom. It also provides the student with a final chance to resolve the conflict and avoid other, more serious consequences. When asked this type of question, students will often come up with good ideas for resolving the problem.

Dealing with aggressive and destructive behaviour

Individual students may occasionally become aggressive and refuse to de-escalate their behaviour or remove themselves from a situation. This means the current level of support and intervention needs to be intensified or altered in some way. In the meantime, school jurisdictions need policies and procedures for responding when students threaten or place themselves or others at risk. Ideally, these procedures are individualized to accommodate the behavioural profile of specific students whose history suggests that they are at risk of becoming aggressive.

To ensure the safety of all individuals in the school, the teacher and other school staff need to:

- develop an individual behaviour support plan that systematically addresses the behaviours of concern (see pages 79 to 87)

- focus on prevention and on developing positive behaviours to replace problem behaviours

- plan how to address situations that might put individual students or their peers at risk (e.g., removing the student or removing the other students from the situation)

- provide relevant training for staff who are involved and require them to use nonviolent crisis intervention

- include a communications component in individual behaviour support plans and ensure that this plan provides for:
  - classroom staff having direct communication with administrative staff (e.g., intercom or cell phones), with specific communication codes for the type of assistance they need
  - a communication strategy for informing parents about what has occurred.

Social factors

Some students develop challenging behaviours because of things that are happening at home or in their community. These situations are generally beyond the influence of the school. It is often neither possible or appropriate (because of confidentiality issues) for all school staff working with a student to have specific information about family-related circumstances. However, when trying to understand and empathize with students' behaviour disabilities, staff may find it useful to generally consider how family and community factors can affect student behaviour.

Family factors may include:

- who is living in the home such as parents, partners, siblings, extended family

- siblings, birth order and potential rivalries

- the stability of home life

- employment situations; for example, one or both parents working out of town for extended periods

- family stressors such as addictions or financial difficulties

- availability of family support; for example, having lunches made or getting help with homework

- recent traumatic events such as death, divorce or separation

- parental discipline and structure, or lack of it, in the home

- parents' and family members' physical and mental health; for example, depression or serious injuries.

Community factors include:

- peer groups: who they are and whether they share common interests with the student

- availability of extracurricular activities

- supervision within the community

- stability of the community

- drug or alcohol abuse

- cultural factors such as ethnic issues.

Bullying behaviour

Recent research by Tanya Beran (2005) at the University of Calgary looked at the relationship between bullying and behaviour problems. Beran found that students who regularly and frequently intimidate, threaten and harass their peers experience significantly more behaviour problems than students who bully less often. Frequent bullying behaviour is associated with other types of overt behaviours including:

- disrupting others
- instigating fights
- becoming easily angered
- resisting following rules.

Moreover, students who frequently bully are less likely to accept responsibility for problems they are involved in, and are more likely to perceive the other person involved as "causing the problem" or "deserving it."

Other social-emotional issues associated with students who bully frequently include:

- depression
- anxiety
- fear
- social skills difficulties.

School-related difficulties associated with this group of students include:

- poor concentration
- low achievement
- absenteeism.

Functions of bullying behaviour

It is possible that students who bully frequently do so for different reasons than students who bully infrequently. Students who engage in continual bullying may be preoccupied with the need to:

- control
- obtain attention
- win in all peer interactions.

Through positive reinforcement provided by the attention of bystanders, bullying behaviours may be maintained and increased. This behaviour may also be related to depression, perhaps in realization that peers may show respect towards them in the form of fear, but may not particularly like them. Students who bully their peers may not feel a sense of belonging at school and this can be aggravated by additional difficulties with learning, attention and adaptive skills.

In contrast, students who do not demonstrate bullying behaviour tend to have stronger social and learning skills and have learned the negotiation and mediation skills essential for adapting successfully in social and academic situations.

Interventions to reduce bullying behaviour

Students who frequently bully need targeted coaching to learn alternatives to aggressive behaviours. They also need more intensive kinds of support such as coping and friendship skills training and family support. Bullying prevention approaches that provide information about the harm of bullying will be ineffective for these students who bully frequently. Rather, these students will require intensive individualized support to help them improve their social skills and emotional regulation.

Visit the Government of Alberta's Web site at www.bullyfreealberta.ca. This site provides information to parents, teens and community members to help them prevent or intervene in a bullying situation.

Neurological factors

Some students display challenging behaviour because they do not have the knowledge or skills they need to behave more positively. These students may not know how to meet behavioural expectations, or have difficulty meeting them because they have neurologically-based disabilities such as learning disabilities, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD), fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), autism spectrum disorders or mental illness.

To better understand how students' disabilities can affect their learning and behaviour, refer to the following Alberta Education resources:

- *Teaching Students with Emotional Disorders and/or Mental Illnesses* (2000)

- *Teaching Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders* (2003) (free PDF version at https://education.alberta.ca/media/385138/teaching-students-with-asd-2003.pdf

- *Teaching Students with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD): Building Strengths, Creating Hope* (2004) (free PDF version at https://education.alberta.ca/media/385139/teaching-students-with-fasd-2004.pdf and https://education.alberta.ca/media/385140/re-defining-success-supporting-students-with-fasd-2009.pdf)

- *Focusing on Success: Teaching Students with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder* (2006) (free PDF version at https://education.alberta.ca/media/385137/focus-on-success-teaching-students-with-adhd-2006.pdf)

- *Essential Components of Educational Programming* for *Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders* (2006) (free PDF version at https://education.alberta.ca/media/1477208/ecep_autism_spectrum_disorder.pdf).

Using a functional behavioural assessment (FBA) approach

A **functional behavioural assessment (FBA)** is an effective process to gather data to identify problem behaviours and examine:[6]

- the relationship between events in the environment

- what comes before and after problem behaviours

- the occurrence or nonoccurrence of specified behaviours under particular circumstances.

A functional behavioural assessment does not end with data collection. The data collected must be used to develop a behaviour support plan that will increase positive behaviour, teach new replacement behaviours and reduce or eliminate problem behaviour. An FBA is not complete until a behaviour support plan is in place and is working effectively.

The presence of a variety of environmental influences can predict, cause, prevent and/or maintain both problem behaviours and appropriate behaviours. A functional behavioural assessment provides information necessary for selecting appropriate interventions for modifying problem behaviours and teaching socially appropriate replacement skills.

The assessment involves gathering information by a variety of methods, including interviews, rating scales and systematic observation.

Direct observations of an individual student in natural environments under a range of conditions are challenging to complete, but will result in richer data. Sometimes, after observations, it may be helpful to experiment with factors. This can be done by carefully manipulating antecedents and/or consequences of problem behaviours to verify their influence on the problem behaviour.

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6. This section adapted with permission from Karen Bain and Brenda Sautner, *BOATS: Behaviour, Observation, Assessment and Teaching Strategies*, 2nd ed. (Edmonton, AB: Special Education Council, The Alberta Teachers' Association, 2007), pp. 40–44.

Use the results of observations to identify the purpose of the problem behaviour. The observational data should identify the environmental situations most likely to be in place when problem behaviours occur, and identify the reinforcement the individual is currently receiving for those behaviours. To teach new and more appropriate behaviours, it is important to select positive replacement behaviours which will serve the same function and offer similar kinds of positive reinforcement. For example, if teacher attention has been identified as inadvertently reinforcing shouting out, teach students to raise hands to gain that attention.

Understanding the consequences and functions that maintain problem behaviours is just the starting point. The assessment must also provide details about the physical and social environment that sets the occasion for problem behaviour so that school staff can modify the environment in ways that directly lead to more positive behaviours. The outcome of an effective behavioural assessment should be an individual behaviour support plan that aligns with a student's individualized program plan (IPP).

To perform a functional behavioural assessment:

1. Establish **data-collecting procedures** for direct observation such as forms to record frequency, duration, interval and anecdotal information. A common tool for doing this is an ABC chart, in which "A" refers to the Antecedents of "B" the Behaviour, and "C" the Consequences of the behaviour. Ensure that all people collecting information understand the procedures to be used.

Antecedents	Behaviour	Consequences
Fast triggers: - teasing by classmates - timed tests - tasks involving a considerable amount of writing - open-ended writing or thinking activities - receiving less-than-perfect marks **Slow triggers:** - lack of organizational skills - lack of impulse control - inability to read social situations - difficulty with abstract or metaphorical language - lack of fine motor skills	- becomes verbally abusive – screams obscenities – threatens to harm others - refuses to complete work - walks out of class	- warning from teacher - increased teasing by peers - removal from classroom/school - one-on-one talks with teacher/teaching assistant/other school staff/administrator - tasks are not completed

Tool 5 provides a sample template for observing and recording behaviour.

Other methods of collecting data about behaviour include:

- **event recording**: the number of times one behaviour occurs within a set period of time

- **interval recording**: identifies behaviour patterns by recording behaviours occuring within a set period of time

- **momentary time sampling**: a record of whether a behaviour occurs at a specific time

- **duration recording**: records the length of time a specific behaviour lasts.

For more information about these methods, see pages 73 to 78.

2. Use collected data to **identify** what specific behaviours require change. Assess behaviours interfering with safety, and academic and social success. Focus on behaviours that have long-term significance as well as immediate concerns. The behaviours most essential to change involve aggression or self-injurious behaviours, or are socially stigmatizing. Rank behaviours in terms of their need for change. Consider the extent and frequency of behaviours and use this data to set the priorities for the plan.

3. Ensure these **behaviours** have clear definitions and can be understood by any staff working with the student as well as by parents and other caregivers.

4. Identify physiological, psychological, environmental and social **factors contributing** to **problem behaviours**. Identify or predict times, events, demands or environmental conditions during which the problem behaviour frequently or always occurs.

These contributing factors may include task demands, people in the environment, medications, seizure activity, staff changes and/or daily activities, any of which can influence behaviour. These events "set the occasion" for behaviours—they are the **antecedents** of the behaviour. Some antecedents occur immediately prior to the behaviour. Other events may contribute to problem behaviour, but be less connected in time. Reinforcement may be more or less important at certain times; for example, food may be highly reinforcing after five hours of no food, but may not be reinforcing directly following a meal.

Tool 6 provides a tool for recording answers to questions about a specific problem behaviour.

5. Identify physiological, psychological, environmental and social **factors contributing** to **appropriate, socially successful behaviour**. Identify or predict times, events, demands or environmental conditions during which the problem behaviour rarely or never occurs.

6. Use a **collaborative assessment** and planning approach with people who know the student best. This approach may involve an interview with the student's learning team members and, when possible, an interview with the student.

    Use checklists or behaviour charts specifically related to direct observation in a particular setting. Assess behaviours across settings, people and tasks. If possible, collect at least five days of observation.

7. Analyze data to identify the **functions** the behaviour is serving the student. Identify the consequences currently maintaining the behaviour—what the individual is "getting out of." Often the student is communicating wants and needs, however, the function may be more than one type. The following are commonly identified functions of problem behaviours. One behaviour may also serve more than one function.

    Typical functions include:
    a. escape from demands
    b. escape from activities
    c. escape from particular people
    d. attention
    e. access to preferred objects or activities
    f. relief of stress or anxiety
    g. increase or decrease sensory stimulation
    h. self-stimulatory
    i. automatic behaviour and habits.

    The function of the behaviour will help identify the most effective type of intervention to change that behaviour. The following chart illustrates typical functions of behaviour and possible interventions.[7]

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7. Chart on page 43 adapted with permission from Jeffrey Sprague et al., *Best Behavior: Building Positive Behavior Support in Schools–Participant Training Manual (Preliminary Edition)* (Eugene, OR: Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior, University of Oregon, 2003), Section 14, p. 4.

Function of behaviour	Possible interventions
Escape or avoid unpleasant activities, tasks or persons	• reinforce student for compliance to instructions • teach student how to seek help • teach acceptable alternatives to escape • reinforce student for absence of problem (e.g., catch them being good) • initially remove or reduce demands and then gradually increase expectations
Attention seeking from peers or school staff	• increase attention for positive behaviours • ignore problem behaviour • teach acceptable alternatives for attention
Access to activities or tangibles	• deny access to activity or tangible • teach acceptable alternatives to obtain access (e.g., ask for it politely) • avoid giving access to material or activity following problem behaviour
Sensory stimulation	• interrupt and redirect the student • use reinforcement when behaviour is not occurring • increase access to alternative sources of stimulation

8. Make **summary statements** by describing and summarizing behaviours, situations and reinforcers that appear to be currently maintaining the problem behaviour. Identify patterns of behaviour. "During math, David rips up papers to avoid the work."

9. **Manipulate identified environmental characteristics** that appear to be influencing behaviour to prove or disprove the hypothesis if possible and if this does not provoke or escalate problem behaviour. For example, provide David only one problem per work page and allow for a few minutes of preferred activity when that one problem is completed before starting the next problem. This step can significantly reduce the frequency of the problem behaviour. Sometimes it can even prevent it altogether.

10. Set realistic and practical **behaviour change goals** that include the target replacement behaviour, conditions and criteria for change. "David will remain seated and work 10 minutes on a math assignment." "David will be given answers to check his own work after each five problems when the assignment appears challenging for him."

Replacement behaviours must:

- be achievable within a given time frame

- be relevant to the student's needs

- be positive and enabling

- be clearly defined and understood by both students and staff.[8]

Examples

Problem behaviour	Replacement behaviour
Susan wanders around the room during "Oh Canada"	Susan stays within a boundary around her desk indicated by tape on the floor
Bill becomes agitated and physically strikes another child	Bill gives the teacher an "I need a break" card
Terry physically attacks one student when they are near each other	Terry stays at least two metres away from a specific student

11. Design **interventions** and positive behaviour support programming which address:

- antecedents (prevention, environmental modifications, instructional adaptations to be made by staff)

- behaviours (what replacement behaviours look like)

- consequences (correction procedures, extra assistance, response cost, increased supervision).

Use modelling and reinforcement to increase the effectiveness of teaching the new skill.

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8. Adapted with permission from Karen Bain and Brenda Sautner, *BOATS: Behaviour, Observation, Assessment and Teaching Strategies*, 2nd ed. (Edmonton, AB: Special Education Council, The Alberta Teachers' Association, 2007), p. 51.

Prompt and support appropriate behaviour consistently. Specify the nature and amount of positive **reinforcement** or feedback as well as correction procedures. Increase the use of reinforcement when first initiating new behaviours, then fade the reinforcement to promote greater independence and self-control.

12. Document the plan for teaching replacement behaviours. Include **what will be done** by particular staff members and make a plan about who will help and what will be different from current practices. The new replacement behaviours must serve the same function, be useful in different settings and be easily performed.

    Identify **crisis management** strategies to be used when the student continues unsafe or destructive behaviours.

13. Create opportunities for **generalization** of the newly learned replacement behaviours by involving different staff, different materials, and working in different settings on the same behaviours.

    Maintain intermittent reinforcement for newly mastered behaviour over time, especially during major transitions such as changing classrooms or schools.

14. **Evaluate** the functional behavioural assessment process as well as the targeted behaviour change. Share **results** of evaluation and data regarding behaviour as part of individualized program planning and when reviewing individual behaviour support plans. Keep written information for ongoing communication during transitions to new schools or different programs.

Tool 7 provides a sample template for planning a Functional Behavioural Assessment.