

# Conducting Valid and Defensible Behavior Observations

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# Introduction

- Student behavior observations are considered an essential and integral part of functional behavior assessment and often included in psychoeducational assessments.
- Yet, the type and variety of the procedures and methods used sometimes creates problems, particularly when families or teachers feel that the observations do not provide an accurate view of student behavior

# Problems

Why classroom observations are  
not always best to understand  
student behavior

# Problems

- **Single time observations are likely to be of limited validity**
  - Student behavior may vary from day to day and differ across activities. Capturing this information via in-class observations may not be an accurate reflection of how the student functions.
  - Conducting multiple observations is time consuming and school psychologists or private clinicians rarely have the time to do this on a consistent basis

# More Problems

- **Observations are intrusive!**
  - Not all teachers like having someone come into their classes repeatedly (although others welcome it!)
  - Knowing he or she is being observed, the child may not “act like himself.”
  - Putting an unfamiliar adult in a classroom often changes the “feel” of the environment.

# To Summarize

- Single observations are of limited validity and questionable reliability
- Multiple observations may be more reliable, but may still be invalid
- Observations disrupt classrooms. Rather than being a “fly on the wall,” clinicians in the classroom are more like a “hot fudge sundae” on the wall

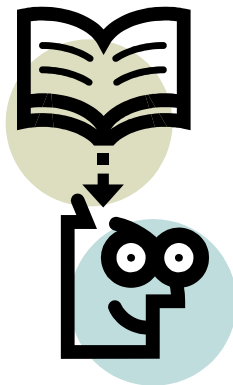
Simply put....

Behavior observations are time-consuming, irrelevant, and a pain in the \_\_\_\_\_.

So, is there any reason to do them?

# Actually, Yes.

- If you don't do an observation, the family, teacher, administration, and anyone else you can think of will feel your assessment lacks credibility
- Further, you may have to present the findings of your assessment at a Due Process Hearing. Imagine being cross-examined by the opposing counsel about exactly what steps you took to “carefully craft” your observation.





# Alternative approaches

- **Needs-based observations**
- **Quasi-quantitative observations**
- **Interactive Classroom observations**
- **Semi-structured group interviews**
- **Ongoing time-limited data collection by the teacher**
- **Survey completed by teacher**

# A Needs-Based Approach

## Why are you observing?

- Determining the need for an FAA or FBA, Teacher or Parent request, Update from prior assessment
  - Need at least a single observation plus survey
- Conducting an FAA
  - Need multiple observations, consider the first for 45-90 minutes, best before recess, then back to class (elementary) or two classes (middle or high school); 2<sup>nd</sup> observation for 15-30 minutes; if needed, 3<sup>rd</sup> observation for 15-30 minutes
- Conducting an FBA
  - Need at least a single observation plus survey
- Part of a psychoeducational or diagnostic evaluation
  - Need at least a single observation

# Quasi-quantitative observations

- Use an AlphaSmart or just a laptop
- Record actions as they occur, inserting a “time marker” every 5 or 10 minutes.
- This allows process-type narratives while being able to estimate how often behaviors occur.



# Interactive Classroom observations

- Since you are not “invisible,” why pretend?
- Go around to all students (with teacher permission, of course!) and observe their work
- Note how much of the assignment they have completed as a group, comparing this to the target student
- How much does the student you are observing attend compared to others?
- Does your student return quickly to task independently, with prompting?

# Semi-structured group interviews

- Most students are not referred because they have trouble getting along with adult, but with peers. So, why spend time interviewing them one on one?
  - Instead, with teacher permission, take 4-5 students with your target student into the library or another place where you can quietly talk. Pick some topics, a few suggestions:
    - What time do you go to bed?
    - What are some of the best things about school? Worst things?
    - What kinds of music do you like?
    - What do you do on computers?
    - What is the best thing to do if another student is bothering you?
- Observe how your target student participates in comparison to peers, Inhibited? Extroverted? Remains on topic? Gets defensive? You'll think of other areas to track.

# Ongoing time-limited data collection by the teacher

- **Frequency** – need “apples to apples” comparisons
- **Duration** – especially time to return to task
- **Interval** – preferred, doesn’t have to be “research style,” can be whether or not it occurred every 15, 20 or 30 minutes

# Surveys completed by teacher

- Consider asking the teacher to take a behavior survey. Possible choices include:
  - Achenbach
  - BASC
  - BRIEF
  - DSMD
  - Rapid Screener
- Depending upon which instrument you use, consider an item analysis.
- Match those behaviors reported by the teacher to those identified during direct observation.

# “Observations on Steroids”

## Using Technology to Enhance the Process

- Using an AlphaSmart
- Switch over to dictating via digital voice recorder.
- Send the result off for transcription
  - Consider one of the many services, average is a couple of dollars per page
- Some voice mail systems (e.g., [www.Accessline.com](http://www.Accessline.com)) saves your voicemails as WAV files, which can be emailed or transcribed using a digital sound system (not very expensive)



# Presenting and Testifying Effectively

- Be organized, know your methodology
- Have your results graphed
- Be prepared to discuss your observations in terms of which hypotheses were supported/not supported and how you came to those conclusions
- Describe and define validity and reliability, don't assume the Hearing Officer understands. Discuss your results in these terms
- Pay attention to how the cross-examining attorney rephrases your statements. Don't be afraid to correct them and offer to re-state what you say.
- Always remain polite, no matter what!
- Remember, in an adversarial process, the other goal of the other side is to make you look like an idiot. Don't try to prevent this, just stick to what you know and don't be afraid to say "I don't know" if that is the truth. The attorney representing your district has the job of coming back and correcting or clarifying information. That is **NOT** your job.

# Thank you!

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