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## A Statewide Survey of Special Education Administrators And School Psychologists Regarding Functional Behavioral Assessment

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# **A Statewide Survey of Special Education Administrators And School Psychologists Regarding Functional Behavioral Assessment**

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## **Abstract**

The 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandate that schools evaluate, through the process of a functional behavioral assessment, those students with disabilities who are exhibiting significant behavior problems which may lead to suspension and expulsion. We conducted a statewide survey of special education administrators and school psychologists to examine their views of the relative effectiveness, usability, suitability, and practicability of functional behavioral assessment procedures for two types of problem behaviors (i.e., low-level chronic or low frequency unique problem behaviors). The results suggest that special education administrators and school psychologists are generally supportive of the use of functional behavioral assessments for a range of problem behaviors. However, administrators and psychologists are uncertain of whether such assessments would be acceptable for unique low-frequency problem behaviors that lead to suspension and expulsion such as violations of firearms and drug policies. Additionally, special education administrators and school psychologists indicated that educators might be unaware of and unwilling to conduct functional behavioral assessments. Implications for practice and future research needs are discussed.



Functional behavioral assessment (FBA) will play a large role in the education of students with disabilities given the 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Within the section on discipline, these amendments require that the IEP team consider positive behavioral interventions, strategies, and supports if a student with

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disabilities has behavior problems (Discipline Provisions, 1997). Further, the behavior intervention plan must be based on a FBA. In this context, it is of interest to explore the views of special education administrators and school psychologists regarding the effectiveness, usability, suitability, and practicability of FBA.

Exploring special education administrators' and school psychologists' views of FBA is important because there is little doubt that they will play a key role in their implementation for two primary reasons. The first reason centers on the fact that there is little agreement in the field of applied behavior analysis regarding the specific procedures that educators and other professionals should use when conducting an FBA (Nelson, Roberts, Mathur, & Rutherford, 1999). Compounding this issue, the concept of functional assessment is encompassed within intervention and services in a wide range of fields related to special education including occupational therapy (Veloze, 1993), speech and language pathology (Frattali, 1992), physical therapy (Wickstrom, 1990), and vocational rehabilitation (Halphren & Fuhrer, 1984). Thus, there is little doubt that educators and other professionals will struggle in their efforts to develop FBA processes and procedures required in the IDEA '97 amendments.

A second reason we believe that special education administrators and school psychologists will play a key role in the implementation of FBA focuses on differing interpretations of when a FBA should be conducted. There are essentially two potential contexts for conducting FBAs: strict and broad interpretation of IDEA '97 (National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 1998).

Strictly and literally speaking, FBA is required only when students with disabilities become the subject of school discipline proceedings. Section 615(k)(1)(B) (I) of the statute states: "Either before or not later than 10 days after taking a disciplinary action described in subparagraph (A)...if the local education agency did not conduct a functional behavioral assessment and implement a behavioral intervention plan for such child before the behavior that resulted in the suspension described in subparagraph (A), the agency shall convene an IEP meeting to develop an assessment plan to address the behavior." Thus, in a strict sense, a FBA may only have to be conducted in these narrow circumstances. Although such a narrow reading of the statute may meet the procedural letter of the law, doing so may present some liabilities to schools given a broader reading of the statute.

A broader reading of the statute reveals language which can be interpreted as requiring FBA, when needed, throughout the special education decision making process. Considering a series of interactions between related sections of the IDEA '97 statute could derive this interpretation. Section 614(b)(2)(A) states that in conducting full and individual evaluations for any student suspected of having a disability, "the local education agency shall - use a variety of assessment tools to gather relevant **functional** and developmental information..." (emphasis added). Although it

is not clear what "functional" information should be collected as part of a full and individual evaluation, one could interpret this statutory language as requiring school personnel to conduct an FBA when needed.

Additionally, Section 614(b)(3)(D), states that "Each local education agency shall ensure...assessment tools and strategies that provide relevant information that directly assist persons in determining the educational needs of the child are provided." It is clear that teams must collect information on the specific education needs of children and youth with disabilities in all relevant domains where the individual demonstrates educational need.

Taken together, the requirements of §614(b)(2)(A) and §614(b)(3)(D) appear to suggest that if a student with disabilities has behavioral issues, a FBA would contribute important information as part of the full and individual evaluation. The statutory language in the IEP section of IDEA '97 supports this interpretation. Section 614(d)(3)(B)(i) of the statute states "in the case of a child whose behavior impedes his or her learning or that of others, consider where appropriate, strategies, including **"positive behavioral interventions, strategies, and supports"** to address the behavior" (emphasis added).

Additionally, it is important to note that the assessment of student behavior is not a new concept in IDEA '97. Behavioral assessments have been required by IDEA when necessary since the inception of the Act. IDEA '97 is simply more prescriptive in some cases about when and how specific assessments must take place. Indeed, FBA includes many of the characteristics required by IDEA '97 such as (1) needs rather than diagnosis focused, (2) behavioral intervention planning, (3) the use of time-series assessments of treatment effectiveness as opposed to single-point or pre-post measurement strategies, and (4) the use of multiple measures that ensure the IDEA '97 procedural safeguards in assessment are addressed. Thus, potential differences in the interpretations of the statutory language related to FBA should be viewed as differences in degree, not in kind.

Although there is little doubt that FBA procedures will play a key role in the improvement of services for students with disabilities who exhibit problem behavior, it appears that we know little about professionals' views of such procedures. The overall purpose of this study was to examine the views of special education administrators and school psychologists regarding the effectiveness, usability, suitability, and practicability of and the degree to which FBA is consistent with current approaches and best practice. Another purpose of this study was to examine whether the type of problem behavior (i.e., low-level chronic or low-frequency unique problem behaviors) influenced the views of administrators and psychologists with regard to the use of FBA. Still another purpose of the study was to examine the views of special education administrators and school psychologists regarding the extent to which educators are aware of and have had training in FBA.

## Method

### *Respondents*

The respondents were special education administrators and school psychologists in the State of Arizona. The Arizona State directory of personnel was used to identify special education administrators for each of the 231 school districts in the state. Surveys were sent to all 231 of these administrators. One hundred and five special education administrators completed and returned a survey, representing a return rate of 45%. An analysis was conducted to examine potential differences between the responses of respondents and nonrespondents. Twenty nonrespondents were randomly selected, contacted by telephone, and asked to complete the survey. A copy of the survey was then sent to these individuals for them to complete and return. A series of t-tests were conducted for each item on the survey to determine if there were statistically significant differences between the responses of respondents and nonrespondents. In all cases, there were no statistically significant differences (e.g., Item 1:  $t(123) = 1.76, p < .05$ ).

The Arizona State School Psychology Association directory of personnel was used to identify school psychologists for each of the 231 school districts in the state. Surveys were sent to all 289 of these psychologists. One hundred and eleven school psychologists completed and returned a survey, representing a return rate of 38%. As with special education administrators, an analysis was conducted to examine potential differences between the responses of respondents and nonrespondents. Twenty nonrespondents were randomly selected, contacted by telephone, and asked to complete the survey. Seventeen of the 20 nonrespondents completed the survey. A series of t-tests were conducted for each item on the survey to determine if there were statistically significant differences between the responses of respondents and nonrespondents. In all cases, there were *no* statistically significant differences (e.g., Item 1:  $t(123) = 1.14, p > .05$ ).

Taken together, a total of 216 respondents completed the survey. This represented an overall return rate of 42%. Again, nonrespondent analyses revealed no statistically significant differences in all cases.

### *Procedures and Survey*

Respondents were faxed one of the two forms (the type of form was randomly assigned) of the survey along with a cover letter that explained the purpose of the survey (i.e., to determine their views of the functional behavioral assessment procedures for the specific problem behavior described) and directions for completing and returning the survey. Additionally, a one-page description of FBA using a question and answer format was provided (see Appendix A). The four questions regarding FBA addressed included: (1) What is a FBA?; (2) Why do we do

a FBA?; (3) How do we carry out a FBA; and (4) What should be the outcomes of a FBA?

Respondents completed one of two forms of the survey. Each form asked respondents to consider a brief vignette describing a student in relation to conducting a functional behavioral assessment. The vignettes represented the two interpretations (strict vs. broad) of the functional behavioral assessment guidelines included in the amendments to IDEA '97 discussed above. Additionally, except for the particular type of problem behavior described, all aspects of both vignettes were held constant (i.e., age, gender, and type of disability). Further, respondents addressed the same items for each vignette.

One vignette described a 6th grade male student with learning disabilities who exhibited chronic low-level problem behavior (broad interpretation of FBA guidelines in IDEA '97) such as off-task, noncompliance, and other low-level disruptive behaviors. The other vignette described a similar 6th grade student with learning disabilities who was suspended by the principal for violation of the schools' drug and firearms codes (strict interpretation of FBA guidelines in IDEA '97).

After reading the vignette, the respondents answered the same 12 questions (see Table 1). The first seven questions focused on views of the usability (Questions 1 & 2), suitability (Question 3), effectiveness, practicality (Questions 4 & 7), and effectiveness (Questions 5 & 6), of FBA for the particular behavior represented in the vignette. Questions 8 and 9 focused on the extent to which FBA was consistent with current approaches to and best practices for the particular behavior represented in the vignette, respectively. The tenth question centered on the suitability of such procedures for a problem behavior other than the one represented in the vignette. The remaining two questions focused on the extent to which respondents believed that educators were aware of and whether their respective district had provided any training on functional behavioral assessment procedures.

Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each of the 12 items on a 7-point Likert-type scale (i.e., 1 = strong disagreement; 2 = disagreement; 3 = little disagreement; 4 = undecided; 5 = weak agreement; 6 = agreement; and 7 = strong agreement). Respondents indicated their response by circling it on the scale.

## Results

A 2 (unique low-frequency and low-level chronic problem behaviors) by 2 (special education administrators and school psychologists) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted for each question. These analyses enabled us to examine whether the type of problem behavior influenced the views of special education administrators and school psychologists. These analyses enabled us to examine also whether the views of special education administrators and school psychologists differed from one an-

other. The means, standard deviations, and associated F values are presented in Table 1.

*Table 1*  
*Mean responses of Special Education Administrators and School Psychologists and associated F values.*

Question	Administrators		Psychologists		(A)		(B)	
	Unique <sup>1</sup> Mean	Chronic <sup>2</sup> Mean	Unique Mean	Chronic Mean	Student F(1, 213)	Professional F(1, 213)	A X B F(1, 213)	
1. Willing to use for this type of problem behavior.	3.82 (1.61)	4.89 (1.53)	4.24 (1.72)	4.83 (1.57)	10.86**	1.55	1.05	
2. Likely to use with this type of problem behavior.	2.72 (1.56)	3.89 (1.43)	2.71 (1.95)	3.83 (1.48)	5.98*	1.68	2.59	
3. Suitable for this type of problem behavior.	3.63 (1.77)	4.63 (1.42)	3.50 (1.69)	4.56 (1.50)	57.63***	2.71	1.65	
4. Difficult to implement with this type of problem behavior.	2.82 (1.80)	4.40 (1.45)	3.27 (1.72)	4.33 (1.52)	34.66***	0.19	2.15	
5. Effective for this type of problem behavior.	3.71 (1.72)	5.30 (0.99)	4.01 (1.63)	5.21 (1.16)	35.42***	1.24	0.12	
6. Produce permanent improvements for this type of problem behavior.	3.64 (1.68)	4.77 (1.25)	3.75 (1.56)	4.77 (1.24)	18.79***	1.01	0.19	
7. Practical in terms of time for treating this type of problem behavior.	3.54 (1.82)	4.17 (1.59)	3.84 (1.76)	4.10 (1.64)	2.01	0.77	0.13	
8. Consistent with current approaches for this type of problem behavior.	4.08 (1.64)	4.74 (1.84)	4.14 (1.71)	4.67 (1.88)	8.18*	0.20	0.43	
9. Consistent with best practices for this type of problem behavior.	4.01 (1.64)	4.75 (1.44)	3.60 (1.63)	4.79 (1.57)	24.06***	0.53	0.02	
10. Suitable for other types of problem behaviors.	5.78 (1.32)	5.91 (1.15)	5.44 (1.30)	5.81 (1.34)	0.83	0.53	1.22	
11. Aware of functional behavioral assessment procedures.	3.33 (2.02)	3.55 (1.80)	3.55 (1.93)	3.52 (1.80)	0.27	1.78	0.40	
12. Educators have had training on functional behavioral assessment.	2.28 (2.17)	2.12 (1.17)	1.43 (1.69)	2.10 (1.42)	0.19	1.17	1.21	

*Note.* Questions are paraphrased.<sup>1</sup> Students who exhibit chronic problem behaviors (e.g., off-task and noncompliance).<sup>2</sup> Students who exhibit low-frequency problem behaviors that typically result in suspension or expulsion (e.g., violence and violation of drug policies). Numbers in parenthesis are standard deviations. Means in which the 95% confidence interval does not encompass the midpoint of the scale (1=strongly against proposition; 4=undecided; 7=strongly for proposition) are underlined. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , and \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Additionally, to determine whether respondents were significantly resolute, rather than indecisive or neutral about our propositions regarding FBA, the 95% confidence interval for each mean was computed to determine whether it encompassed the midpoint of the scale. Those means in which the 95% confidence interval did not encompass the midpoint of the scale (i.e., 4=undecided) are underlined in Table 1.

The results of these analyses are presented in two sections. The first section details the views of special education administrators and school psychologists regarding the effectiveness, usability, suitability, and practicability of FBA. This section also enumerates administrators' and psychologists' views of the extent to which FBA is consistent with current

approaches and best practices. The second section presents the views of special education administrators and school psychologists regarding the educators' awareness of and the extent to which they have training on FBA.

### *Usability, Suitability, Practicability, and Effectiveness of FBA*

Close inspection of the means in Table 1 reveals that the views of special education administrators and school psychologists held a positive view of the usability, suitability, practicability, and effectiveness of FBA for students who exhibit low-level chronic problem behaviors. Both administrators and psychologists were resolute in their views on six of the nine questions exploring the usability, suitability, practicability, and effectiveness of FBA. They believed that educators would be willing (Question 1) to use FBA to address the problem behavior of students who exhibit low-level chronic problem behaviors. They believed also that FBA was not only suitable (Question 3) and effective (Questions 5 & 6) but also consistent with current approaches (Question 8) and best practice (Question 9). However, special education administrators and school psychologists were uncertain regarding the difficulty (Question 4), practicality (Question 7) and whether educators would use (Question 2) FBA for students who exhibit low-level chronic problem behaviors.

In contrast to students who exhibit low-level chronic problem behaviors, special education administrators and school psychologists generally were not only uncertain of the usability (Questions 1 & 2), suitability (Question 3), practicability (in terms of time: Question 7), and effectiveness (Questions 5 & 6) of FBA but also whether FBA is consistent with current approaches (Question 8) and best practice (Question 9) for students who exhibit unique low-frequency problem behaviors (see Table 1). Furthermore, administrators and psychologists were resolute in their view that it would be "difficult" to implement a FBA for such students.

Close inspection of Table 1 reveals that there were statistically significant main effects for type of problem behavior (unique low-frequency and low-level chronic) on eight of the nine questions that addressed the usability, suitability, practicability, and effectiveness of FBA. There was not a statistically significant main effect for type of problem behavior only in the case of the practicality of FBA in terms of time (Question 7). There were no other statistically significant main or interaction effects.

Special education administrators and school psychologists believed that FBA is more effective, useful, suitable, and practical in the case of students who exhibit low-level chronic problem behaviors than with those who exhibit unique low-frequency behaviors. Administrators and psychologists were also more likely to believe that the use of FBA with students who exhibit low-level chronic problem behaviors is consistent with current approaches and best practice than they were for those who exhibit unique low-frequency problem behaviors. Additionally, special



education administrators and school psychologists believed that FBA would be suitable for problem behaviors other than unique low-frequency and low-level chronic problem behaviors.

#### *Awareness of and Training Provided on FBA*

Special education administrators and school psychologists were uncertain whether educators were aware of FBA (see Table 1). Furthermore, administrators and psychologists indicated that educators have not had training on FBA. In both cases, there were no statistically significant differences in the views of special education administrators and school psychologists.

### **Discussion**

There is little question that FBA will play a key role in improving special education services for students with disabilities who exhibit disruptive behavior in the future. Although functional behavioral assessment is not a new concept, school districts will no doubt interpret the amendments to IDEA '97 differently. Some will interpret the FBA requirements strictly while others will do so in a much broader fashion. The overall purpose of this study was to examine the views of special education administrators and school psychologists regarding the usability, suitability, practicability, and effectiveness of FBA and the degree to which FBA is consistent with current approaches and best practice. Another purpose of this study was to examine whether the type of problem behavior (i.e., those that represent a strict and broad interpretation of IDEA '97) influenced the views of administrators and psychologists. Finally, the study examined the views of special education administrators and school psychologists regarding the extent to which educators are aware of and have had training in FBA.

There are several findings we would like to highlight. The first finding centers on the general usability, suitability, and effectiveness of FBA. Special education administrators and school psychologists tended to view FBA positively if used with low-level chronic problem behaviors such as off-task and noncompliance. The views of special education administrators and school psychologists regarding the usability, suitability, and effectiveness of FBA are consistent with a broader interpretation of IDEA '97. Their views are also consistent with scholars' calls to use FBA in a proactive preventative manner (Scott & Nelson, in press). Persuading educators and other professionals to design interventions based on a FBA, while measuring outcomes in terms of student academic and social performances, may be more palatable for chronic low-level behaviors than for those problem behaviors that might be addressed through a strict interpretation of IDEA '97.

Our finding that special education administrators and school psychol-

ogists strongly supported the use of FBA for problem behaviors other than the ones that we specified strengthens the above conclusion. Of course, we are unsure of the range of problem behaviors for which administrators and psychologists believed such assessments would be acceptable. Nevertheless, administrators and psychologists support of FBA for problem behaviors other than the ones that were specified suggests that they believe that such assessments would be acceptable for a range of problem behaviors other than unique low-frequency ones such as fire-arm and drug violations.

Another finding we would like to highlight focuses on differences in the views of special education administrators and school psychologists regarding the acceptability of FBA for problem behaviors that would be addressed through a strict interpretation of IDEA '97. In contrast to chronic low-level problem behavior, administrators and psychologists were generally uncertain about the effectiveness, usability, and suitability of FBA for unique low-frequency problem behaviors such as violations of firearms and drug policies. This latter finding is problematic because the new IDEA, at a minimum, clearly intends that FBA be used as an intervention planning tool for student behaviors that threaten the safety and security of the school environment (Nelson et al., 1999). These behaviors tend to be unique low-frequency problem behaviors.

Still another finding we would like to highlight centers on the views of special education administrators and school psychologists regarding the practicability of FBA for addressing problem behaviors. Regardless of the type of problem behavior, administrators and school psychologists generally viewed FBA as difficult to implement and impractical in terms of time. This finding suggests that researchers and others must develop efficient FBA procedures to ensure their ongoing use in schools. Research on the social validity and treatment acceptability of behavioral techniques and strategies suggest that it may not be sufficient for FBA to be effective for educators to use it to address problem behaviors (c.f. Kazdin, 1981).

A final finding we would like to highlight focuses on the views of special education administrators and school psychologists regarding educators' awareness of and training on FBA. Administrators and psychologists believed that educators are unaware of and have not received training in FBA. This is especially problematic because essentially educators are where the "rubber hits the road." Experience with direct instruction has shown that although teachers may be reluctant to engage in a practice initially, providing them with support and guidance toward an outcome they perceive as successful facilitates their acceptance of that practice (Engelmann, Becker, Carnine, & Gersten, 1988; Proctor, 1989).

### Limitations and Implications

It is important to point out two primary limitations to the present study before addressing its implications. The first limitation we would like to point out centers on the limited sample of respondents included in the present study. The survey examined the views of special education administrators and school psychologists in one state. Additionally, although our nonrespondent analysis revealed *no* statistically significant differences in the views of administrators and psychologists who responded and those who did not, we can not fully be sure that our results would have differed if our return rate had been higher. Thus, generalizations beyond the present sample of respondents should be made cautiously. The second limitation we would like to point out focuses on the limited nature of our vignettes and questions. We only explored two potential sets of problem behaviors in the present study. Thus, the findings must be restricted to the problem behaviors and questions that were used.

Nevertheless, the results of this study have implications for practice and research. In the case of practice, researchers, educators, and other professionals who develop and implement FBA procedures in schools will encounter varying interpretations of the contexts for using FBA. Although this study did not fully illuminate this issue, our results suggest that educators and other professionals are more likely to accept the use of FBA in the case of low-level chronic problem behaviors than low-frequency unique behaviors such as firearm and drug policy violations. Thus, attempts to implement the 1997 amendments to IDEA requiring the use of FBA in the case of the latter behaviors may meet with some resistance among educators and other professionals.

Additionally, helping educators to implement FBA will be a challenge. Special education administrators and school psychologists, almost without exception, indicated that they believed that educators were unaware of and had little or no training in FBA. This finding is disturbing because, in our view, collaborative teams best implement FBA and subsequent interventions. Therefore, the entire school staff need substantial training if FBA is to be seen as a system of effective behavioral support (Colvin, Kameenui, & Sugai, 1993; Nelson, 1996), which includes a systematic approach for identifying students at risk for behavioral difficulties and providing proactive interventions. Given the nature of efforts to change the life course outcomes of students with disabilities who are at risk for school suspension, comprehensive staff development programs in FBA must be developed.

In the case of research, our findings suggest that researchers should consider the social validity of FBA procedures. We did not find any studies that have examined the social validity of FBA (Nelson et al., 1999). Researchers, to date, have primarily focused on basic research questions such as contingent arrangements that produce and support the self-

stimulatory behavior of individuals with severe and profound disabilities or the outcomes of behavioral interventions that have resulted from FBA procedures (Nelson et al., 1999). Researchers must explore the usability, suitability, practicability, and effectiveness of FBA procedures within a wide range of students and school contexts.

Researchers also should explore the relationship between the social validity of FBA procedures and the effectiveness of the resultant behavioral interventions for different types of problem behaviors and contexts. Researchers could build upon work conducted on the social validity of behavioral and academic interventions. Such research would provide educators and other professionals useful information with which to identify those FBA procedures that are not only effective but also socially valid.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Definition and Description of Functional Behavioral Assessment**

#### ***What is a functional behavioral assessment?***

A functional behavioral assessment is a process of gathering information about the things or events that influence a student's problem behavior. These things or events could be external factors in the student's environment (e.g., social interactions and work demands) or internal factors (e.g., depression and biological factors).

#### ***Why do we do a functional behavioral assessment?***

A functional behavioral assessment gathers information that is used to guide the development of a treatment or intervention plan. This plan should focus on reducing or eliminating the problem behavior and increasing appropriate desired behaviors, the appropriateness of the student's current placement, and the identification of needed related services (e.g., social work and counseling).

#### ***How do we carry out a functional behavioral assessment?***

There are three major strategies for collecting functional assessment information.

1. *Indirect/informant methods.* This involves collecting information from teachers, parents, and other relevant persons through interviews, checklists, rating scales, or questionnaires.
2. *Systematic observation.* This involves conducting structured observations to collect data on the occurrence of the behavior and things that occur that may be related to it. These observations are usually done during the student's typical routine or activities.
3. *Experimental manipulations.* This involves setting up situations in which different events are directly manipulated (i.e., presented and withdrawn) to assess the effects of the events on the student's behavior (i.e., problem or replacement).

#### ***What should be the outcomes of a functional behavioral assessment?***

There are several outcomes of a functional behavioral assessment.

1. A thorough description of all the problem behaviors of concern, including how often they occur, how long, and how intense they are, and those that tend to occur together (e.g., student refuses to work, then yells, and then throws his book).
2. Identification of the things and events that seem to trigger or predict

- when and where the behaviors are going to occur (e.g., when the student is not getting attention or when they are asked to work on math).
3. Summary statement or hypothesis about the problem behavior (e.g., "John's problem behaviors appear to be "escape-motivated").
  4. Description of data that support the hypothesis.
  5. Behavioral intervention plan that leads to (a) direct interventions, (b) provision of needed services, and (c) appropriate placement.