Functional Assessment Helps Behavioral Treatment

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BALTIMORE — A functional assessment of behavior problems in children with developmental disabilities helps clinicians form a hypothesis for why a problem behavior occurs and what reinforces it, so they can use the information to guide treatment, according to a behavioral scientist at the Kennedy Krieger Institute, Baltimore.

"Functional assessment has been found to be the one factor that predicts successful behavioral treatment of maladaptive behaviors," regardless of functional level, age, or type of behavior, Theodosia Paclawskyj, Ph.D., said at a meeting on developmental disabilities sponsored by Johns Hopkins University.

Three tools for making functional assessment are interviews with parents, structured checklists, and direct observation of the child's behavior. These methods are best used together to obtain a complete picture of the situation, Dr. Paclawskyj explained.

Use the interview as the initial step in assessing behavior problems, she said. A functional assessment interview includes these questions:

► When does the behavior always occur?
► When does the behavior never occur?
► What happens just before and just after the behavior?
► Are certain times or certain activities more likely to prompt the behavior?
► What do you think the child is trying to communicate through the behavior?
► Does the child appear to want a reaction from you after the behavior?
► Does the child avoid demands as a result of the behavior?
► Does the child exhibit more of the behavior when he or she must wait for something?
► Does the child exhibit this behavior even if he or she is alone?
► Does the child engage in the behavior in a repetitive way?

Structured checklists, such as the Motivation Assessment Scale and the Functional Analysis Screening Tool, have the advantage of being efficient with no risk to the patient. But the psychometric properties of checklists may be inconsistent, so they should only be used as one component of an overall functional assessment, along with interviews and observation, Dr. Paclawskyj said.

When it comes to observing a behavior directly, consider positive and negative reinforcement as motivations for external (social) and internal (nonsocial) behaviors.

In positive reinforcement, adding a stimulus causes a behavior to increase, but in negative reinforcement, the removal of a stimulus causes a behavior to increase.

"Many people misinterpret negative reinforcement as punishment," Dr. Paclawskyj said. "Also, positive doesn't always mean good; it means the person gets something as a result of their behavior."

Potential functions of external/social behaviors—from the child's perspective—include getting attention. "Remember that attention is any kind of response from another person," said Dr. Paclawskyj. Receiving any sort of attention or receiving a tangible object or activity are types of positive reinforcement for a social behavior. Escape from the demands of a difficult task or relief from an undesirable situation are types of negative reinforcement for a social behavior.

The potential functions of internal/nonsocial behaviors are harder to assess, Dr. Paclawskyj noted. But positive reinforcement for these behaviors includes sensory stimulation and the release of endorphins, which have been linked to some forms of self-injury. The removal of physical or other discomfort is a type of negative reinforcement for a nonsocial behavior.

Once a clinician has observed a child's behavior, he or she can use functional analysis to prompt the child to demonstrate the behavior to help determine the causes and develop treatments. Dr. Paclawskyj cited data from a study of children with Lesch-Nyhan syndrome, a disorder in which biting the lips, cheeks, and fingers are common self-injury behaviors. In this study, functional assessment showed that self-injury was more likely to occur during times of low social interaction (Dev. Med. Child Neurol. 2001;43:745-9).

Functional assessment and analysis don't involve much subjective interpretation, said Dr. Paclawskyj. "We use research techniques to get a good understanding of the relationship between stimuli and behavior and between consequences and behavior," she explained. ■