



# Wyomissing Behavior Analysts, Ltd.

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## FUNCTIONAL COMMUNICATION TRAINING

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For many years, Behaviorists have noted an inverse relationship between problem behaviors and an individual's ability to communicate (be it with words or gestures). The less proficient the person's communication system, the greater the problem behavior. A number of studies have shown that the problem behavior could be decreased by teaching the person ways to communicate (and without resorting to any punishment techniques). A client who had temper tantrums to escape work was taught how to ask for a break. Another client who got aggressive when frustrated was taught how to ask for help.

What this all suggests is that the problem behavior was in fact the person's communication system. The problem behavior had a communicative function for the person.

Everyone wants to have some influence. If the person has no other way to communicate (or no one will listen to what the person is saying), then hitting people, breaking windows, etc. may be the only way to get a response. Teach the person an alternative way to communicate (and insure someone will listen) and the problem (oh yes - "challenging") behavior becomes unnecessary and might disappear.

Functional Communication Training is the ultimate in replacement skill or functional equivalence training. It is teaching the person how to communicate things the person needs or wants to say to us, not just things we want to hear.

There are a variety of Systems and Training Programs to provide individuals with alternative ways to communicate. Sign Language has been around for a long time. I find Picture Communication Systems to be more useful with individuals with developmental disabilities.

There are a variety of Assistive Devices available. One such device is a Touch Talker which contains a tape recorder. The communicator simply selects and presses discriminable panels on the outside and a prerecorded message is played (e.g., "I want a drink", "I need to take a break", etc.).

In developing alternatives to challenging behaviors, I like to start with what I call an 'I want ...' Card. Whenever the person shows/gives the 'I want Card', the listener is to respond by trying to help the person get what they seem to want. If giving the Card is ever to replace the challenging behavior, it is important that the listener 'jump as high' (if not higher) in response to the Card as to the challenging behavior. Now, that is a challenge!

Functional Communication Training can be appropriate for someone who is verbal as well. We all have a need to improve our communication skills (e.g., to become more assertive). With the verbal individual, a comparable procedure to using the 'I want ...' Card is to use what I call a "Discussion Note". The idea of the Note is to teach the person that sitting down and talking through problems can be more effective than acting them out.

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