

00:00.00

theautismhelper

Hi Erica thank you so much for joining me so I am really excited to have our first episode on practical functional assessment and I have a few episodes scheduled.

00:01.94

Erica Vogt

Hey hey thanks for having me.

00:14.50

theautismhelper

To talk about this. But I think you are a great person to intro this topic and really get into what Pfa is so for those that have never heard of practical functional assessment. Can you give kind of an overview of what it is.

00:25.58

Erica Vogt

Yeah, so practical. Functional assessment is a dignified and safe and effective means of understanding challenging behavior and why it occurs So it's a 2 part process. So The. The beginning of the process. You conduct an open ended interview with adults who have strong relationships with the individual that's exhibiting the challenging Behavior. Um, and that helps you to gain a really personalized understanding of um when the behavior is occurring um the different context that it may be occurring in. And what context that the behavior is not occurring in the second part of the practical functional assessment is the Isca and the isca is a contingency analysis where we set up what would be the perfect day. Or what we call synthesize reinforcement so we bring in all of those things that we know somebody absolutely loves and enjoys theoretically in this context there is a lack of problem behavior because they have everything that they want and Need. So Once we know once we've designed a perfect. Reinforcement context. Um, and we see the individual in a state of happy relax and engage for a period of time then we can start to ah assess the problem Behavior. So We we put in some evocative situations.

01:52.38

Erica Vogt

That are likely to cause that escalation of problem Behavior and so once we see an escalation of problem behavior at those very low level behaviors or Precursors. We return right? back to the reinforcement Context. This allows us to confirm that the reinforcement context was Accurate. So We know all of the things that can keep that person happy relaxed and engage and then we also know what types of situations might evoke that problem behavior.

02:25.41

theautismhelper

That was an amazing summary and like 90 seconds so great work I think Dr Handleley would be proud that was that was awesome. Um, so big picture. How does this process.

02:29.97

Erica Vogt

Thanks.

02:37.59

theautismhelper

Look different than other common assessments that are used in the ABA world. What's kind of different about this whole setup.

02:45.20

Erica Vogt

So when I think about this question my mind goes right to a traditional functional assessment. Um, and the big biggest difference between the traditional functional assessment and the practical functional assessment. Is that the practical functional assessment helps to determine the synthesized contingencies that are maintaining the problem Behavior. So when I say the synthesized contingencies that maintain maintain problem Behavior What I'm referring to is sometimes somebody may engage in problem Behavior to. Gain attention. But then they also utilize that same problem behavior to gain access to their preferred items or activities. So when you're conducting something like a traditional functional assessment. It can be hard to isolate those individual contingencies because. And identify what's maintaining that problem behavior because those events on their own those contingencies on their own may not be evocative enough to um, escalate that problem behavior.

03:49.20

theautismhelper

Yeah,, That's a great answer and I think when I learned about a functional assessment when I was in grad school and I was you know, currently a public school teacher. It was hard for me to even totally wrap my brain around that because. I Saw Firsthand like Anecdotaly that behaviors occur for multiple functions. It doesn't fit so nicely and neatly and like this is attention and this is escape.

04:09.40

Erica Vogt

Yeah, and it can be really challenging Too. I I've conducted some functional assessments before and I've found you know that I've had inconclusive results and then it doesn't help me then to support that individual in creating effective interventions. If I have no idea why the problem behaviors occurring.

04:28.90

theautismhelper

Yeah, exactly Okay, kind of going back to your overall summary of what practical functional assessment is can we touch talk a little bit more about that interview process and what kinds of things you're asking parents Caregivers teachers paraprofessionals in that interview process.

04:47.34

Erica Vogt

Yeah, so that open-ended interview is a really nice interview where you're meeting with like I said before a group of people that know that individual very well and have a good relationship with them. Um, and in my experience. Um I have not included the individual in that process but a lot of the individuals that I work with um are nonverbal um or don't communicate verbally effectively. Um, and so what's really nice about it. Is you get to sit down with all of these people that know this person very well and have very strong relationships with Them. You get to learn about what they love about the person you get to know about what that person loves and what they hold as very important to them and then you also get to find out from the people that work directly with that individual. What are some areas that that may trigger that problem behavior and what. I have noticed is in doing a lot of these open-ended interviews that I see a lot of consistent answers which really then leads me back to that synthesized Contingency process and that that um, synthesized Contingency analysis where um when I'm talking with parents. Grandparents Teachers Parapros I'm finding that the individual may engage in a lot of the same problem behaviors in a lot of different Contexts and what I tend to hear a lot is when I say why? do you think this person is engaging in the problem Behavior I get the answer of.

06:12.30

theautismhelper

Um.

06:19.49

Erica Vogt

While they want their way.

06:21.40

theautismhelper

Um, and yet. So that means you know it has that multiple function multiple components which other assessments may not fully address and what I love about you know when you're talking about the interview and and talking with grandparents and paraprofessionals and all these different people. Actually did an interview yesterday with a bcba and we were talking about. You know the role of a consultant and the bcba coming in and how sometimes teachers it rubs them the wrong way. The you know the bcba the behavioral consultant comes in and tells me what to do. But when we start this process. It's really switching gears

here. It's. Hey we're starting coming to you the parent the teacher. The the paraprofessional has the expert on this child. So it right away develops this really nice kind of team collaborative relationship versus maybe a more traditional like consulting model that has been happening.

07:09.23

Erica Vogt

Absolutely and I think I think that also helps a lot with the buy-in too of the intervention is when you know the caregivers the teachers the parents are are hearing you listening and continuing this conversation about the challenging behavior is that that.

07:24.60

theautismhelper

Um, how.

07:29.21

Erica Vogt

Their son daughter student are experiencing and engaging in they feel heard and then they're willing to try something different.

07:36.31

theautismhelper

Um, yeah, exactly it's that being heard piece I think so many teachers and paraprofessionals. They just don't feel heard so if we can really acknowledge what they're saying and and that is taking an active role in our interventions. Yeah, you're right that buy in peace is right there right away.

07:50.48

Erica Vogt

Yeah, and we talk a lot about how this is a very dignified approach and when I went in this conversation right now I think of it as not only dignified for the individual that we're working with but also for those people that know that student very well.

08:05.75

theautismhelper

Yeah, that's true because they're they're like a key player versus like just taking in that information that someone's giving them.

08:13.34

Erica Vogt

Yes.

08:16.18

theautismhelper

So I know you have a lot of experience with Pfa. What did what does your experience overall look like and how did you kind of get started

utilizing these assessments in schools.

08:25.72

Erica Vogt

Yeah, so back in 2019? Um, I was teaching in a center-based school with students with severe cognitive impairments in autism um, I had a pretty challenging class. There were a lot of dynamics going on in my classroom and we were. Awarded a grant through grand Valley State University start program and this grant was awarded to our entire building where we were going to be working with and learning more about practical functional analysis. Our practical functional assessment and skill based treatment and. Um, we submitted a list of several students and they picked 3 of the students that had the most challenging behavior to come and work with us with and 2 of those students were mine in my classroom. And so I was able to attend a conference a full day conference where we invited caregivers and parents to attend as well. So that they could get a better understanding of this intervention and treatment and then the next day we had um. Consultants from ftf come and join us in our school building and help us to design our first isca and it was very eye opening. It was nerve wracking but it was also exhilarating.

09:50.41

theautismhelper

Um I was like did you feel like you won the lottery because this like especially you're like oh my gosh two of my kids. Yes, let's find like what's going to work.

09:58.65

Erica Vogt

Yeah, it was kind of this um balance of oh yes, I have this extra support for 2 of my students that engage in very challenging behavior but also the nervousness of this is not anything I I understand not anything that I know anything about and. How do I know this is going to work is this actually going to be beneficial or is this another school initiative. So with that I was um, very involved in the process I had requested to be the lead implementer. Um I've been told they didn't have to be.

10:20.79

theautismhelper

Ah, true. But.

10:32.84

Erica Vogt

Ah, because it was a lot to put on a a teacher's plate but I felt very strongly that I wanted to be involved in my students treatment. No matter what that looked like and so I was trained to become a lead implementer with my students. Um I helped to design the cab branches for them. And I worked very closely with our behavior consultant at

the time and we also worked with Ftf as we as we accepted that grant and they were working with us virtually um and so I learned a lot and I made a lot of mistakes and I saw a lot of successes.

11:11.81

Erica Vogt

And it was pretty amazing. So then I continued in my role as a teacher. Um and felt that it was imperative that we continued working on this intervention with the students in my class and then um, two years ago I was asked to step into the role of the behavior consultant position in our building and when I did that we had at that point expanded to some other students within our building and I was able to hop right in and help with supervision. Um I completed the train the train the train the trainer program with Ftf and I became a lead supervisor I was working on conducting the pfas I was designing iscas I was supervising behavior technicians and paraprofessionals in running.

12:05.20

theautismhelper

Amazing. So obviously you have seen firsthand the huge positive impact and successes you know that Pfa can really have and then leading to those successful interventions and I know you can't give.

12:05.54

Erica Vogt

Um, Sbt.

12:21.11

theautismhelper

Specific information on students. But overall what did you see the success look like with within this program.

12:28.85

Erica Vogt

Yeah I Saw some very incredible successes. Um with one of my students in particular. Um there was a lot of very severe challenging behavior that led to multiple people being hurt sent to the med centers. People out on workers comp and it was really messy and there was just this time frame where we didn't know how to best support this student and when we started running Sbt with this student I was very nervous because I was worried about. Evoking that problem behavior because I had seen firsthand the severity of it and we started working with this individual. Um and I just saw some immense progress and then Covid happened.

13:21.50

theautismhelper

Um, of course right? but.

13:22.45

Erica Vogt

Yes, and we got shut down and we were shut down for months and I you know working in a center-based school with students that are the most impacted in our entire county I was really lost on how to service my students. And I ended up convincing the parents to allow us to try to continue to run Sbt virtually with their child and so they allowed for us to try it and the progress continued and it was such an incredible feeling. And that I think was what really drove home for me that this process works this intervention truly works because even when we weren't in person and we couldn't be delivering reinforcement in the same way that we had been before we were still able to develop a reinforcement context. That worked and this was an individual who has some verbal language. But when we began running Sbt with Him. He didn't use that verbal language. Um, and so we offered him a big Mac switch to say that he wanted his way. And we were trying very hard to pair that with the the verbal my way and when we went virtual he started vocalizing that he wanted his way and he has never gone Back. Yes, It's amazing. This.

14:47.90

theautismhelper

Um, oh I love that oh oh my god we need like a we need like a level 2 episode on not only running Sbt but running it virtually that's so impressive.

14:57.17

Erica Vogt

Yeah, it was a very unique situation and and it was I wasn't convinced that it would work. But again, that's what really drove home for me. You know we started working on it in November of 2019. We started working on sbt with our students and it was march. 2020 that we were shut down so we had a very small amount of time and we were still learning in that whole process. So when I really saw when I saw some of that progress happening prior to us getting shut down I was impressed but when I thought when I was able to make that progress virtually. It made a big difference. Yes.

15:35.81

theautismhelper

Yeah, you're like okay now I'm really sold. Okay, let's take I this is that's such a great story. Um, so kind of taking a step back for a second so following Pfa the practical functional assessment that you described. The next step is what you've been referencing this sbt skills based treatment. Can you explain and give kind of an overview of what that is.

15:52.15

Erica Vogt

Yeah, so skill based treatment is an individualized intervention that progressively teaches a variety of essential skills like communication

toleration relinquishing and other contextually appropriate behaviors and so it's a very systematic process. And you're not progressing to the next skill to pray you know it's It's very slowed down so you're not practicing multiple skills at once um throughout the entire process but you're slowly building on the skills that you've taught.

16:28.54

theautismhelper

That's awesome. So can you explain a little bit. Maybe a hypothetical example of what this could look like with a child.

16:35.52

Erica Vogt

Yeah, So um, I have a student who engaged in a lot of self-injury and it was very dangerous self-injury and he was a pretty young guy. Um, and we. We had a very hard time you know he was very their sounds were very aversive to him and it was very hard to create a context for him that was the perfect reinforcement context and we were able to find a space. Where we were able to bring him to a place of joy and see reduced problem behaviors and so from there we practice slowly progressing um some evocative situations for him so adding a little bit of noise some of our so you know us speaking and. Then providing those denials that he's going to be done with this very highly preferred activity and then teaching him to make a request to return back to that reinforcement context rather than engaging in problem Behavior. So the way that skill-based treatment works. Is. You're reinforcing lower level problem behaviors and then eventually you're reinforcing that communication in place of those low level Behaviors. So It's just constantly teaching different replacement behaviors and then building on skills while we're in a place where we're happy relaxing.

18:05.69

Erica Vogt

And engaged.

18:07.14

theautismhelper

That's a great example and I loved um that you pointed out that yes we're reinforcing those lower level behaviors. But so often that creates a much safer environment for students especially in a school in a public school. Kind of referencing what we were talking about earlier with the difference between you know, a Pfa and a functional assessment is a functional assessment is not safe to do in a public school setting and I felt that like immediately when I learned about it I was like whoa whoa we can do this in a public school because it is allowing and evoking those extreme behaviors and allowing you know them to happen versus. And in a Pfa sbt approach for really not hopefully getting to those extreme behaviors.



18:43.83

Erica Vogt

Yes, and it's nice because you're learning how you know in a traditional functional assessment. You're you're turning on that behavior. But I think in the Pfa. It's nice because you're learning how to turn that behavior on but then turn it right back off and you're not letting it get to that extreme.

18:58.47

theautismhelper

Um, yes yes I remember like my professor talking about you know oh in like really extreme situations and in clinics we get like hockey equipment to do an fa and I was like what what my sister of public school like we're lucky if we have Cpi training you know so.

19:03.11

Erica Vogt

You know crisis moment.

19:14.85

Erica Vogt

Instance.

19:17.21

theautismhelper

Yeah, it's It's a much safer solution when it comes to aggression or self-injury and things like that. Well that was a great example I liked kind of visualizing what that looked like with that with that student. Um, kind of speaking of this whole process in a school setting. Obviously this is the you know the setting that you've done this in exclusively and what are how is that gone in a school setting. What are some of the things that go well and what are some of the challenges.

19:41.17

Erica Vogt

Yeah, So I think you know the school setting can be a really nice place because we can create a very sterile environment if we are provided with the space and we have that support from our administration we can create a sterile space where we're able to. Really control many environmental factors. But then with that being said, being in a school building. There's a lot of environmental factors that we can't control and for example I had talked about the young man that had a hard time with noise level while when we were bringing him to the treatment space that we were able to to completely. Create that synthesized reinforcement context for him. It was never truly a reinforcement context because there were so other students in the classroom next door who were making noises and while those noises were very quiet to us. They were very very evocative to him.

20:33.83  
theautismhelper  
Um, and.

20:38.96  
Erica Vogt  
And so when I'm looking at you know there's there's a lot more lot more people involved. Um just being you know I had I've I've run some sbt as a wandering Sbt. So we're walking in the hallways with students but that's not always the safest place to um to put in the eo.

20:39.23  
theautismhelper  
Um.

20:58.94  
Erica Vogt  
Because there's other students or other people involved in the hallways and so it's not always the safest. Um, when you when you know when you can't control all of those factors.

21:11.11  
theautismhelper  
Yeah, that's kind of the main thing with schools is there's just a lot outside of your control versus like a home or a clinic setting. Um, well obviously though.

21:15.56  
Erica Vogt  
This is.

21:20.73  
theautismhelper  
You've been able to overcome those challenges and still have this be really successful. Um, how have you overcome some of the challenges on getting staff. Buy-in or kind of referencing what we talked about earlier was that less of an issue when since you had that interview component to start it off.

21:36.90  
Erica Vogt  
Well I Ah, personally when I was when I was introduced to Sbt I you know as a teacher I was a little bit nervous and I think that really helped me to know how to talk to other teachers about what this will look like. So I think that that's been beneficial from my experience but I think really talking to staff and showing them that it works is a big piece of that buy-in and I know you know we've we've had we've worked with some staff that were very hesitant or very resistant. To following the process The way that it was but you know what I've what

I've really done is sought out people who are very interested in trying new things and getting a little creative and then having them help support that implementation with. Staff that haven't had that buy in yet because then they're able to see that somebody else bringing the joy and see how much fun. It actually is to run the intervention and then realizing how safe it is.

22:45.18

theautismhelper

Um, yeah, that's a great strategy so we're like pairing you know, not to like we're not putting 2 reluctant people together. We're putting someone that maybe already has had some of that buy in with someone that hasn't that's a great strategy.

22:54.67

Erica Vogt

Yeah, and it's It's nice because within our building we have a ton of buy-in because we have a lot of people who've been able to see those successes so you know initially I think it was it felt sort of like another school year initiative. But. Once we were able to start utilizing it in the school building. It just trickled down and it came it became contagious. Yes, exactly.

23:18.00

theautismhelper

Um, and then everyone's like wait I want some of that too and you're like yes you do. But so where do you recommend teachers or parents or clinicians go to learn more about Pfa and Sbt.

23:33.46

Erica Vogt

Um I would recommend looking right on the Ftf website they have some amazing on-de demand courses. They have a lot of really great live courses as well. Any time that I have any questions about um, any of the. Interventions I go to that website or the practical functional assessment website has a ton of resources and they have some free videos linked. They have links to the various research articles that were created and those are some of the best places to go the. Other place um would be the Pfa Sbt Community Facebook page and I know that that group has also created their own website with a variety of trainings. Um and a lot of inner. Um, a lot of resources. Offered on that website as well. So those are some of the the places that are my go to when I'm looking for some additional support.

24:36.67

theautismhelper

Great. Yeah I will link all 3 of those um within the show notes. Well thank you so much Erica you explained everything so well and gave such a thorough overview of this whole process which is kind of complex. But. When you think of that big picture view of really why it works it

does really make sense. So I appreciate you taking the time to explain things in detail to us all right? Thanks so much.

24:57.25

Erica Vogt

Yeah, thank you.