Welcome, Class, to our Unit 7 Discussion Board lecture. This week, you read about functional communication training. Functional communication training, or FCT, uses differential reinforcement to teach an alternative communicative response that results in the same class of reinforcement that has been maintaining a problem behavior. FCT has been shown to be effective with individuals with developmental disabilities and/or intellectual disabilities; but it has also been used successfully with individuals with ADHD and traumatic brain injury. FCT has been used successfully with clients who engaged in various types of problem behavior including aggression, self-injurious behavior, and disruptive behavior. There are several steps to using functional communication training effectively in behavior plans. These steps will be discussed over the next few slides.

The first step in using FCT is to conduct a functional assessment to determine the function of the problem behavior. We need to know what is currently reinforcing the problem behavior so that we can withhold this maintaining event contingent on the occurrence of the problem behavior and begin applying it contingent on the occurrence of the communicative response. In the example on your screen, we see that Claire is engaging in the target behavior of screaming. She engages in this target behavior when her teacher is giving attention to other students and by default not giving attention to her. When Claire screams, she is reinforced with attention from her teacher. Her teacher immediately walks over and gives Claire attention. The function of Claire’s problem behavior is attention because this is what immediately follows the occurrence of the problem behavior.

Once you have determined the function of the problem behavior, you now want to select a socially acceptable communicative response that will replace the problem behavior. This communicative response can be a vocal response (spoken words), pictures to exchange, sign language, gestures, or even a response on a voice output device. The response you select will depend on your client’s abilities. There are also some other things to consider regarding the form of the communicative response. Research shows that when the communicative response requires less effort to perform than the problem behavior, the person is more likely to use the new communicative response. The communicative response you choose should require less effort to perform than the problem behavior. You should also consider how recognizable the response would be to others in the client’s environment. For example, if you want to teach a response using sign language, do other people in the client’s environment know and recognize sign language? What about people out in the community, will they recognize what your client is asking for using sign language? Finally, consider how quickly the client will be able to acquire the new communicative response. You want to avoid teaching your client a response that will take a long time to learn. You want your client to acquire the new response as quickly as possible.

Once you have determined the reinforcer to use and the new communicative response to teach, you need to decide on how you will teach the communicative response. Will you set up contrived opportunities or use natural opportunities for teaching? You, the therapist, arrange contrived opportunities. You set up situations in which the value of the reinforcer is increased. For example, in Claire’s case we identified attention as the reinforcer. Claire was engaging in screaming to gain access to her teacher’s attention. To set up a contrived opportunity to teach a new communicative response, we would withhold attention from Claire. When we withhold attention, this creates a deprivation state in which attention is more valuable as a reinforcer and behaviors that result in attention are more likely to occur. The longer we withhold attention from Claire, the more likely she is to want attention and engage in the communicative response to gain attention. In contrast, with natural opportunities, we wait for the establishing operation to occur naturally. Meaning, we wait for the maintaining reinforcer to become valuable. In Claire’s case, we would wait for the teacher’s attention to move away from Claire to other students and then implement our training procedure while Claire’s motivation for teacher attention is high in the natural environment. As you can imagine, waiting for natural opportunities will take longer. Contrived opportunities usually result in quicker acquisition of the new communicative response. As you will remember from prior units, teaching a new response involves prompting and reinforcement. The reinforcer you use is the reinforcer identified in the functional assessment. You can use either least-to-most prompting or most-to-least prompting for your response prompts. You can refer to Unit 3 if you need a refresher on the prompting procedures. A continuous reinforcement schedule should be used during the initial teaching trials for the communicative response. This means you reinforce the communicative response every time it occurs. Once the new communicative response is acquired, you can begin thinning the schedule of reinforcement. Once of the most effective ways to thin the reinforcement schedule is to introduce a time delay between the response and reinforcement. The last thing to consider in your plan for teaching the new communicative response is to decide if you will use an extinction procedure with the problem behavior. As a reminder, extinction means that you withhold reinforcement for a problem behavior. In Claire’s case, we would no longer provide attention contingent on screaming. We would only provide attention when she uses her new communication response and requests teacher attention. Research has shown that functional communication training that does not include extinction rarely results in a reduction of the problem behavior. Therefore, extinction is recommended with functional communication training, when safe to do so.

When training a new communicative response to replace a problem behavior, you want to make sure your client uses the new response in all relevant environments with all relevant people. There are several ways to promote generalization of the new behavior. The first is to incorporate multiple trainers into your training procedure. Instead of having just one person implement the FCT procedure, have 3 different people implement the procedure. You should also implement the training in as many settings as possible. This will make it more likely the new communicative response will be used in multiple settings. If you are using contrived opportunities for your training, you want to make sure your training environment is as similar to the natural environment as possible. You can use similar items and a similar environmental set-up to make your training environment similar to the natural environment. Finally, another way to promote generalization is to implement the FCT procedure in every setting in which the communicative response will be used. This is obviously more time consuming and will take longer to achieve generalization.

That wraps up our Unit 7 Discussion Board lecture! Thanks for listening!