PROJECT ACCESS

Operational Definitions

DEFINITION

"Operational definitions describe target behaviors clearly and objectively to facilitate consistent and accurate measurement. The validity of fba results depends, at least in part, on defining target behaviors precisely." (Steege et.al, 131).

PURPOSE

The purpose of an operational definition is to make sure we are taking data correctly and if another person were to come along and pick up our data clipboard, they would be able to get the same "numbers" as us.
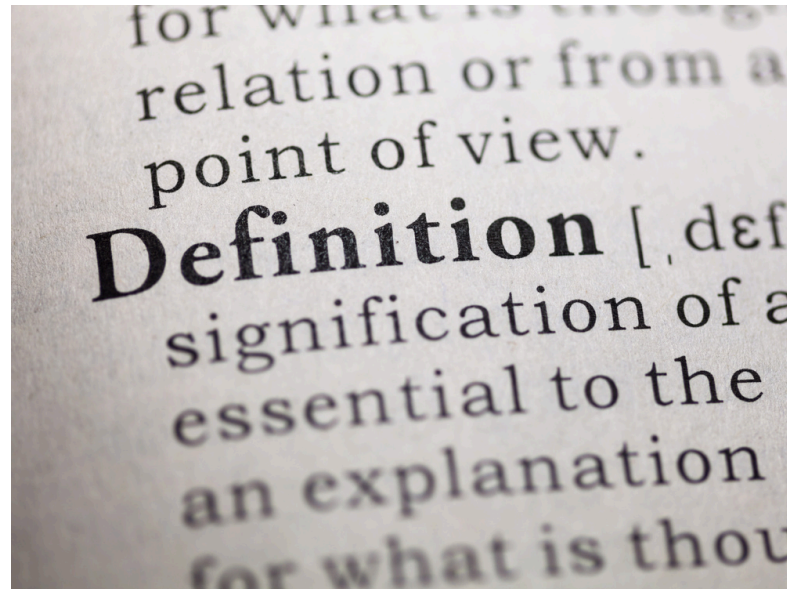
OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS SHOULD BE...

- Objective- must be defined in observable terms. This means no inference terms or terms including emotions, thoughts, etc.
- Clear- must be well defined and not open for interpretation. Multiple observers should be able to observe and agree on occurrences/non-occurrences of behavior.
- Complete- states observable forms of the behavior and includes examples/non-examples if necessary.

REMINDERS

- We want to know exactly what it is we are looking for when we observe and take data on these behaviors. <u>This means we cannot use broad or subjective terms such as meltdown, tantrum, refusal, non-compliance, fits, escalated behaviors, etc.</u>
- Sometimes these words can be used but they need to be objectively defined. Ex; Gage engages in physical refusal behaviors in the form of arms crossed across chest, shaking head no and ripping papers at his desk. Cindy engages in hitting behaviors in the form of hand to body contact with a closed fist with enough force to leave a mark, cause an audible sound or move the other body.
- Stating timed criteria at the end of an operational definition is not necessary for initial data collection except in rare circumstances. 2-3 times per week, 5 times per day etc. should not be part of an operational definition. The reasoning for this is two things...
  - You would not know this yet when writing an operational definition. This information would likely come after you have observed and taken data on the operationally defined behaviors.
  - What happens when the behavior occurs outside of these parameters? Does it not count in the data? For example, if you said it occurs 2-3 times per week, what about if it only happens once? Would you not count it as a data point as it does not meet the operational definition criteria? What about if you said it happens between 1:00-2:00? Does the behavior not count if it happens at 9:00?
- <u>Be cautious of using words such as intent. We can't measure a learner's intent to do something, only what we see.</u>
- <u>We want to avoid using emotions in an operational definition.</u> We are only defining what we are tracking data on and we can't observe and take data on someone being upset or frustrated. We only want to know what that looks like when they are upset and frustrated.
- Replacement behaviors do not go into the operational definition. This also comes later on in the FBA process. Try to remove yourself from the situation and pretend you know nothing about how frequently behaviors happen, your hypothesis as to why they happen, what would help them, etc. ONLY include what you see and will track data on.

HOW TO DEFINE

BEHAVIOR

so that anyone can tell it's happening

1. DEFINE THE BEHAVIOR

Define the behavior in clear language using simple terms. Limit the definition to something very specific. "Hitting" isn't specific enough. Instead aim for "hitting his sister with an open or closed fist with sufficient force to leave a mark or make a sound during playtime." Each behavior should be looked at individually.

2. ADD QUANTIFIERS

Clarify the definition further with quantifiers such as: how often, how many times, how hard, how fast, how far, how loud, how long. If you're targeting hitting, how hard does the contact have to be to qualify? Does it need to leave a mark? The qualifiers should distinguish an intentional hit instead of accidental contact.

MAKE THIS CLEARER WITH EXAMPLES AND NON-EXAMPLES

3. EXAMPLES

Examples clarify times when you would consider the behavior to be happening. They help eliminate confusion so that anyone will know if they are seeing the behavior. An example of hitting might be "hitting his sister with an open hand with sufficient force to leave a mark when she is playing with his favorite toy."

4. NON-EXAMPLES

Non-examples clarify the definition further by showing times when someone may see a behavior similar to the one being described, but where the behavior may be appropriate to the context. For hitting, a non-example may be "pushing his sister out of danger."

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- <u>MasterABA-Operational Definitions help</u>
- <u>More Examples</u>: These are not perfect but they are a great starting point! Remember to add more information about your specific student.
- <u>FBA Fact Sheet</u>

GET CONNECTED!