

# 22

## *Assessment of the Learning Environment, Case Study Assessment, and Functional Behavior Analyses*

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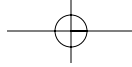
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- ◆ Ongoing Assessment and Decision Making
- ◆ The Strengths Perspective
- ◆ Dynamics of the Learning Environment
- ◆ Prereferral Interventions
- ◆ The Case Study Assessment (CSA) and the Social Developmental Study (SDS)
- ◆ Special Education Assessment
- ◆ Adaptive Behavior Assessment
- ◆ Functional Behavior Assessment



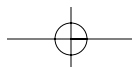
### ONGOING ASSESSMENT AND DECISION MAKING

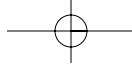
Assessment is a systematic way of understanding what is happening in the pupil's relations within the classroom, within the family, with peers, and between family and school. It provides a basis for deciding which interventions will be most effective. Thus, it is an individualized effort to identify and evaluate the interrelations of problems, people, and situations (Siporin, 1975). The objective of assessment is effective intervention with a system that is itself in process. Assessment is more than a one-time, required procedure, or a formal evaluation. It is a continuous, ongoing process in which school social workers engage as they work with students, their families, school personnel, and community agencies. Its power is its focus on the identification of strengths in individuals and systems rather than on deficits alone. It is geared toward collective decision-making processes potentially involving the social worker, the parent, the pupil, and the team. The social worker's decision about which intervention to use comes from integrating data and drawing conclusions about the interrelated factors contributing to the problem(s) and the potential effectiveness of various interventions. Because assessments are individualized to the purpose and context of the assessment, the worker needs to develop a systematic way to gather and evaluate information, sifting out significant details from the potentially vast universe of information available.

### THE STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE

Because assessment procedures are often used to determine whether a student has a disability and is eligible for special education, they often concentrate on documenting limitations in student performance. Although some information about deficit or risk areas is needed, attending to a student's strengths and talents can ensure that the assessment provides a holistic, balanced perspective of overall functioning (Gleason, 2007). A strengths-based assessment focuses on a student's resiliencies, talents, connections, skills, and gifts (Cowger, Anderson, & Snively, 2006). It attempts to understand the supportive elements in the environment that help a student grow or respond effectively to stress. It explores how a student has been resilient or has adapted successfully when faced with challenges (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1999). In a strengths-based assessment, questioning strategies attempt to identify "what works" and "how it works." During assessment interviews, the social worker might use:

- ◆ Exception questions ("When things were going well, what was different?")
- ◆ Survival questions ("How have you managed to survive this far?")
- ◆ Support questions ("What people have given you special understanding, support, and guidance?")





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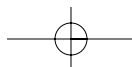
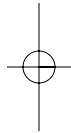
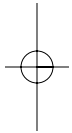
- ◆ Esteem questions (“What accomplishments in your life have given you pride?”) (Parton & O’Byrne, 2000; Saleebey, 2006).

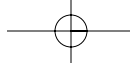
The relationship-oriented process of eliciting examples of a student’s strengths and talents builds trust between the social worker, the student, and the family (Gleason, 2007). When the social worker communicates a student’s strengths in reports and at meetings, the interdisciplinary team is able to acknowledge the student’s progress, existing skills, humanity, heroism, and courage. The team can use detailed information about previously successful supports and interventions to advocate that these effective strategies be replicated and further developed (Gleason, 2007). The team can also use information about a student’s strengths and talents to address problems and risk areas through creative methods.

#### DYNAMICS OF THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Assessment of the complex dynamics of learning environments, especially the classroom environment, is essential to any understanding of a pupil in school. Information is gathered through observations and conversations that occur throughout the school day. Through sensitivity to signs of potential problems with individual students as well as indications of more general systemwide problems, the social worker is able to take a proactive approach to identify issues that need to be addressed either individually or through a broader base of team effort. This information is shared with others who function as part of the decision-making process. Prior to their work in a school setting, social workers should have a good general understanding of human development, family interaction, relationships of children in a community context, and group dynamics.

On this foundation, school social workers need to develop an understanding of classroom group dynamics. Teaching styles and classroom group composition have an impact on pupil behavior and the learning process. Classroom management often takes a great deal of the teacher’s time, yet some teachers have little or no training in group dynamics. The understanding of the classroom is an interactive understanding, coming from direct observation and from the teacher’s account. Social workers may look for negative patterns so they can be extinguished. Consider a situation where children may feel fearful, unsafe, or challenged by their peers. If the teacher feels uncertain or unequipped to deal with the problem, the behavior of one child may increase and become “contagious” to others. Perhaps an overwhelmed teacher is unwittingly fanning the flames of general out-of-control behavior with a fearful or excessively rigid response. Perhaps the legitimate need to clamp down on an out-of-control situation overlooks the needs of other children in the class. While understanding problematic issues is important, social workers can also notice and examine the contextual con-





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ditions present when things are going particularly well in the classroom so they can be further developed (Gleason, 2007). For example, when students are listening, behaving, and learning, what conditions are in place? What is the teacher doing? How is the classroom arranged? What directions were given? How were students supported, reinforced, or engaged? By providing an objective, strengths-based perspective through classroom observation and consultation with the teacher, the social worker may help the teacher identify more effective solutions for managing the classroom.

The first prerequisite to any person's effective functioning in any group is safety. Nothing else can be done without the belief that one is safe, that one's personhood and dignity will be respected. Both teachers and students need safety. This is so important that a person's energies will be deflected by safety concerns before investing in anything else. A classroom or school environment that does not value each person's contribution and that permits bullying, scapegoating, or other abusive behavior will hardly be able to do much other than cope with its own toxic surroundings. In addition to outlawing bullying, the school community must work at developing a climate of acceptance and positive value for each person. Effective schools present learning and social processes to which all students can connect. The atmosphere of productive work, respect, and comfortable order is noticeable immediately when one enters the building or classroom. Leadership is clear and uncontested. The climate is safe and orderly. There is an emphasis on basic skills and continuous assessment of pupil progress. There are high expectations for achievement (Finn, 1984; Purkey & Smith, 1983). In the effective school or classroom, these are taken for granted by the students and faculty, but they are not accidental. They are the result of a good deal of work over a number of years by the school leadership, and by teachers, students, and community. When something upsets this equilibrium, the school community (or classroom) may go into a crisis mode, but it can be a productive crisis if members work constructively together to restore the lost (and remembered) equilibrium.

Assessments of the learning environment start with observation and concrete description. To learn the process of assessment of the learning environment it is best to begin with a student the teacher has some concern about and a classroom where you are welcome to observe unobtrusively. Forms for observation, such as the ones in chapter 24, are useful ways to begin to find the patterns and sequences of the student's interaction with learning tasks, the teacher, and other students. To look further for patterns and sequences, a good model to follow is the Antecedent-Behavior-Consequences (ABC) model. Here you, as an observer, record in anecdotal form in each instance of (A) significant antecedent events, (B) the behavior of concern, and (C) the immediate and longer-term consequences of the behavior. From repeated observations and interviews with the teacher and parents, you can begin to map out the *times* and *conditions* where the

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student *did* or *did not* exhibit the particular behavior of concern (Raines, 2002; Repp & Horner, 1999). You can then begin to develop some hypotheses about the possible *functions* or purposes of the behavior. Hypotheses are plausible explanations of the function of the behavior that predict the general conditions under which the behavior is most likely to occur, as well as the possible consequences that serve to maintain the behavior (Raines, 2002). The key is to develop a conceptual language for nonacademic, developmental learning, such as those illustrated in the sampler of developmental (functional) learning objectives in table 26.1 in chapter 26. With this approach, you can begin to explain classroom behavior and develop a positive behavior intervention plan, changing the antecedents and/or consequences of the behavior and/or assisting students to develop skills to deal with certain situations.

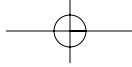
#### Functions of Behavior

Normally students are expected to behave in class in ways that address the tasks of their own learning and do not interfere with the learning of others. When students are off-task or interfere with others, it is assumed that their behaviors may serve functions of *seeking attention* from the teacher or others in the class, *communicating* their needs to teacher or peers, or *avoiding* academic tasks (Zuna & McDougall, 2004). These functions cover motivations for a wide range of behavior and are a good beginning. Raines (2002) goes further to suggest needs from the perspective of normal development: for autonomy, individuation, and control, for self-esteem, to regulate stimulation, and to set some structure in what may be perceived as an unstructured environment. Other functions of behavior, maladaptive and less amenable to immediate change, may be a need to repeat a learned scapegoat role, to create safety from imagined threats, to display grandiose invulnerability, to be punished, to have revenge, or to derive pleasure from the discomfort of others (Raines, 2002).

#### Antecedents in the Classroom

Each classroom is different, reflecting the teacher's preferred style and the composition of the classroom group. To begin to understand these differences we need to consider:

1. The number of students in the classroom;
2. The resources available;
3. The amount of freedom a teacher has to individualize and modify curriculum or select alternative behavior management techniques;
4. The amount of time to individualize for one student's needs;



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5. The degree of pressure placed on teachers for accountability through state and district “high-stakes” testing and the effect of that on the learning process;
6. The group composition and atmosphere of the class: How many “prosocial” students? How many students with difficulties? How much time is available “on task”? How much distraction is there? and
7. The teacher’s preferred style and repertoire of teaching approaches to respond to a situation or to the needs of particular students.

Details about the classroom environment that can be significant to the student can include seating arrangement, lighting, window location, noise from outside the room, total number of students in the room, number of interesting items hanging around the room, and so on. Distractions (being close to a window, etc) can make a big difference for students with learning difficulties or ADHD. Class size, class structure, number of discipline problems, student-to-teacher ratios, classroom management rules, direction and frequency of teacher attention, and the number of opportunities for students to respond academically all affect student learning (Roberts, 1995). Teachers teach in different ways. Where do teachers position themselves in proximity to the student? Are modifications made to individualize material to students who are having difficulties? Does the teacher appear confident dealing with issues of discipline?

Understanding the learning environment demands that we first understand the realities a particular teacher is facing. We cannot really advocate for an individual student without advocacy for the teacher’s needs, and without empathy for the teacher’s reality. Without some understanding of the pressures on teachers, social workers will have difficulty developing a working relationship with them or even gaining their acceptance of the assessment information. Teachers have different styles that can be effective with certain types of students. Some teachers are very comfortable with their firmness and can work compassionately with students needing limits. Others do better with youngsters by using patience, warmth, and nonpossessive concern. Each of us responds to every situation within the framework and limits of ourselves as persons. Experienced teachers often can call on a variety of approaches to a situation, especially if they can analyze it objectively. It is important for school social workers to practice with teachers the same attitudes they typically are trained to use with students and parents. They should exhibit a nonjudgmental attitude, start where the teacher is, exercise positive regard, and assume teachers are doing their best given the amount of support they have, available resources, and the extent of their experience.

An understanding of the pupil’s perspective often comes with experience, from the teacher’s account, and from observation, but there is hardly a substitute for the learning contained in a direct interview with the pupil.

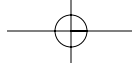
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In the interview, the social worker can explore whether personal or family factors are supporting, assisting, discouraging, or distracting the student. The social worker might ask the student about his or her interests and supports through questions such as: “If you had to join one sport, hobby, or club, what would it be?” “What is one way you’re a good friend?” “What is your favorite part of the day?” “Of what are you most proud?” “How has your family helped you out?” (Gleason, 2007). Answers can offer rich clues as to how to potentially rekindle the student’s motivation, build on talents, and capitalize on existing supports. The student might communicate other important information during the interview. Perhaps a student could be motivated by a different tangible or social reward than the ones currently available in the classroom. Sometimes a child needs glasses, warm clothes and shoes, a medical exam, a hearing test, or a welcoming friend in a new and frightening environment. Teachers are often more receptive to trying alternatives when they understand that they can make some impact on what they see as an initially impossible situation or that problems are more complex than initially perceived. The small steps of progress that they see are in reality very important. The social worker often needs to reframe the student in positive terms to the teacher. The child is not simply being oppositional or lazy. Both the teacher and the social worker need to give up the idea of a quick, mechanically smooth solution to the problem. Solutions eventually do emerge with trial and error, persistent support, time, patience, and appropriate engagement with the problem and the people involved in it.

#### PREREFERRAL INTERVENTIONS

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) encourages pre-referral intervention. It specifically mandates that eligibility as a student with emotional disabilities requires that the student have the characteristics of disability over an extended period of time and that the problem behavior has persisted even after attempts at intervention have been made. It emphasizes school-wide approaches and early intervention services to reduce the need to label children as disabled. Documentation of efforts to work with the student through the identification of appropriate functional areas of learning and Goal Attainment Scaling (see chapter 26) are critically important from a compliance standpoint as well as for practical reasons.

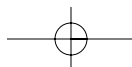
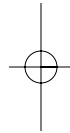
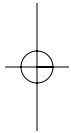
When students are experiencing nonacademic difficulties and are not showing clearly identifiable disabling conditions, it is appropriate for teachers to seek consultation with the team of colleagues designated to assist in reviewing possible interventions to support positive changes in student performance and/or the school social worker. The support team will often review interventions already attempted, conduct a functional assessment of the student’s behavior, and monitor student response to interventions over a designated period. It is essential that interventions focus not only on

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ameliorating problems directly, but also on building on student strengths with the expectation that these interventions will activate the motivation, self-esteem, confidence, or social support that is also needed to improve the student's problem area. As a general rule of thumb, at least three interventions should be attempted to achieve objectives over the course of six weeks. If the student shows progress on the objectives, even though not "cured," the team has to make a decision. On the one hand there is progress and more time and further interventions could be tried rather than proceeding with the referral for special education assessment. On the other hand there could be pressure to "get on with the referral," because the minimum time has been expended. If there is progress, the need to maintain the student in the least restrictive environment would support going with the progress. However, this will not be successful without discussion and the commitment of everyone: the student, the parents, and the teacher(s).

**THE CASE STUDY ASSESSMENT (CSA) AND THE  
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENTAL STUDY (SDS)****Purpose and Definition**

Assessment brings everything together by creating a picture of how pupils function in a learning situation, with their families, and with their peers in their school and in the larger community. *Case Study Assessment* (CSA) is a more formal assessment process in which school social workers participate. The CSA is a compilation and analysis of information concerning those life experiences of the child, both past and present, that pertain to his or her problems in school. It provides a comprehensive baseline of the pupil's personal and social functioning as well as identifying significant environmental realities and assisting with planning interventions. One major purpose of the CSA is to assist the team, the parents, and the pupil in understanding the pupil's life circumstances as they relate to school performance or behavior. A second major purpose is to assist parents and school personnel to develop the most suitable educational environment and to intervene in a way that would be most helpful for the optimum learning and development of the child. The CSA includes information from many sources, including the student, parents/foster parents, teachers, other school personnel, involved agency personnel, and other significant people outside the school, such as extended family or other caretakers. Each is significant in developing a profile of the student's current social and developmental functioning. When the CSA is used as part of the evaluation for services for a child with a disability, it should include an assessment of the pupil's adaptive behaviors, discussed later in this chapter. Although the CSA is sometimes referred to as the *social history*, a tool often used by social workers to understand client dynamics, the CSA has additional components



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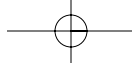
that make it more comprehensive than a social history. The CSA includes a basic description of the following:

1. The pupil,
2. The pupil's current social functioning and the presenting problem,
3. Observations in classroom(s) as well as other less structured school environments,
4. An individual interview with the pupil,
5. The pupil's sociocultural background,
6. Any events or stressors possibly contributing to the problem,
7. Other significant life experiences, and
8. Current abilities of the pupil.

The CSA is an assessment of the whole child in his or her environment. It focuses on identified strengths as well as areas in need of support. It brings into focus the developmental systems and ecological factors that affect the child's learning and behavioral patterns. By involving the family in this information gathering, the school social worker can begin a cooperative working relationship between parents or guardian and the school that may not have been present earlier. A relationship can be established through which emotional support, counseling, information about community resources, and legal rights can be discussed, and the mediation of significant differences between home and school can begin. The relationship with the family formed by the social worker when compiling a CSA can continue through the development and implementation of an educational plan. Even if it is a brief contact, this relationship frequently can have a positive impact on the parents or guardians, helping them to address feelings of anxiety or alienation from their child's educational experience. During this process the social worker needs to help parents gain an understanding of the implications of the assessment for their child's long-range educational needs. Giving parents or guardians the chance to vent frustration, anger, or fear of the future for their child is time well spent. In a few cases this may lead to more than one meeting, but it will pay off later when active parent or guardian cooperation will be necessary for the success of the child. Parents may also be eager to share positive information about their children. Social workers can ask, "What is your son or daughter good at?" "What does your son or daughter do that makes you proud?" "What time do you enjoy most with your son or daughter?" By eliciting positive stories and examples of the child's resiliency from parents, the social worker can build trust and help the team further understand the child's gifts and needs (Gleason, 2007).

#### Components of a Case Study Assessment

The CSA assembles the evaluations done by the school social worker into a single written statement. With the addition of professional judgment, the

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foundations for the social worker's recommendations emerge. We outline ten components that contribute to the gathering of information for a CSA:

1. Pupil interview(s),
2. Parent interview(s),
3. Social history and current functioning,
4. Significant health history and current health needs,
5. Socioeconomic and cultural background,
6. Assessment of the pupil's learning environment,
7. Observation of the pupil in the school (in classrooms, in individualized tasks, in a structured group, in the playground, and ideally in the home environment),
8. Consultation with the pupil's current and (preferably) previous teachers,
9. Review of student files (grades, discipline, achievement testing),
10. Consultation with other staff and agencies when necessary.

Although the potential wealth of descriptive information gathered through this process may go beyond the scope of one's assessment focus, only information directly pertinent to the child's educational progress that does not breach the right to confidentiality of the parent or child may be included in the written report. As a useful concrete framework, we can outline nine components of the CSA:

**I. Identifying Information**

- A. The child's name, birth date, school, grade, and teacher
- B. Each family member's name, age, relationship to the child, educational background, occupation, employment, address, and marital status
- C. Names of other persons living in the home and their relationship to the child
- D. Race/ethnicity of the family
- E. Brief impression of the child at your initial meeting

**II. Reasons for Referral**

- A. The stated reasons for the referral and any specific questions that should be addressed
- B. The problem (the child's learning or behavior) as described by the teacher, parent, or others
- C. What has been done to try to correct the situation (should include at least three significant interventions)?
- D. What were the immediate precipitating events that prompted the referral?
- E. A checklist of specific behaviors that interfere with the learning process

**418 Section III Assessment, Consultation, and Planning in School Social Work****III. Sources of Information. A list of dates and sources of data obtained should include, but not be limited to, the following:**

- A. Home visit(s) or alternative modes of interviewing parents, guardians, or other relatives
- B. Social worker's or other's interview(s) with the child
- C. Review of school records
- D. Outside evaluations
- E. Observations of the student ideally in various settings, but at least in the classroom and one unstructured situation (e.g., recess)
- F. Review of health history
- G. Teacher interviews

**IV. Developmental History**

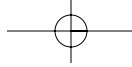
Developmental milestones may be significant and can include problems that occurred during pregnancy, delivery, or any unusual conditions at birth. This information conveys an understanding of the child over time to determine whether development is progressing appropriately. Developmental history from infancy forward should include tolerance of frustration, sources of frustration, and what parental coping strategies have been employed. Emotional development includes the ability to successfully get needs met and to develop satisfying age-appropriate relationships. Lucco's (1991) tables of developmental evaluation provide an excellent developmentally informed guide for this phase of assessment. In addition, for a child between ages 3 and 5, the social-developmental profile may include an assessment of the following:

**Infancy to 5 years of age**

- A. Degree of independence
- B. Quality of and types of interpersonal relationships experienced
- C. Self-image
- D. Adaptability
- E. Play behavior

**Children 5 years and older**

- A. Level of independence
- B. Interpersonal relationships, including quality of
  - 1. Peer interactions
  - 2. Adult interactions
  - 3. Range and intensity of play activity
- C. Self-image
- D. Self-awareness
- E. Self-esteem
- F. Self-confidence

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- G. Coping and effectiveness in social situations
- H. Sensitivity to others
- I. Adaptability and appropriate persistence
- J. Problem-solving abilities

The CSA can include any traumas, hospitalizations, accidents, health problems or chronic conditions, disabilities, unusual problems, or chronic need for medication, if relevant to the child's educational functioning. The reasons for absences from school need to be considered. The child's stamina, energy level, and length of attention span in specific situations or times of day can be significant. The child's physical appearance and conduct while in the company of the social worker should be noted. This information can form the basis for an evaluation of the child's strengths and areas of need. It will be useful for the team, particularly if the information provides a different perspective on the youngster. Significant health issues can provide important clues to why children have developed learning or behavioral problems. Previous interventions to address medical or health issues may not have been reported. More detailed family and student risk factors should be covered as part of the assessment process. This would include vision or hearing problems during early development, as well as recent screenings.

**V. School History**

The school history for young children begins with day care, nursery school, preschool, and early childhood classes and experiences. Increasingly, children experience group learning and day-care facilities from infancy forward. This section should include a chronological account of informal and formal learning experiences, including their changes and interruptions and the progress or lack of progress the child has made to date. School records are quite useful. For an experienced school social worker often a cumulative record gives a clear indication of the issues and directions in the pupil's life, learning patterns, and what appears to work and not work. The record would reveal attendance patterns, progress rates, special instructional assistance, testing results, and remarks of teachers. Teacher's remarks should be interpreted cautiously, but they often reveal what the pupil's behavior may have brought out in others, as well as insights into the pupil's progress at different periods. School records can also be reviewed to identify academic or social strengths such as "child does not give up, even when tasks are difficult," "child excels in group projects," or "child has perfect attendance." Parents frequently recall the pupil's difficulties making transitions, and their own difficulties, and significant changes, problems, and traumatic experiences that have affected their child's learning progress over the years. The parents' attitudes toward early learning situations, their involvement with their child's learning, and their expectations of the school are all important data. The school history includes a current classroom observation.

**420 Section III Assessment, Consultation, and Planning in School Social Work****VI. Cultural Background, Family History, and Current Issues**

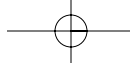
The assessment of cultural background is done to determine how the child's culture or background affects his or her ability to function in school as well as whether the school and community are responding appropriately. All children have a cultural background. It includes the family's ethnicity and primary language spoken in the home, the degree of English-speaking proficiency, the usual mode of communication (spoken, sign, etc.) utilized by the student and the family, and the family's socioeconomic status relative to the community. In a dynamic sense, how do the family and the student process the meanings from their culture and from the broader culture? Children's understanding of their cultural background may include ethnic customs, special observances, and unique dress or food not shared by others their age, but also how they come to experience the larger society. An appropriate assessment might read in part:

Ranjit's family is of East Indian origin, and they observe Sikh traditions. They currently reside in a community with about 25 percent minority population; however, only one other family is of East Indian background, also of Sikh tradition. Fluent in English and in their own language, both of Ranjit's parents come from professional families in India. Economically, Ranjit's family seems to be about average in this solidly middle-class community. Though the family is close knit, they feel well respected and comfortable with their neighbors. Ranjit only speaks English and in many ways appears more adapted to the culture of his peers than to the culture of his parents.

In addition, this section may include information specific to this family's history or dynamics—for example, length of marriage, separations, divorces, deaths, remarriages, moves, transfers, changes in child care, presence or absence of various family members, and other significant events. Observations of the child's role in the family, family expectations, opportunities for friends outside of school, and sense of humor can all contribute to understanding the child as a person in the environment. The atmosphere within the family (which may be temporarily in crisis) should be noted, along with the family's methods and abilities, individually and as a unit, to cope with stressful situations. Because, as previously mentioned, some of this information may be highly sensitive and confidential, an agreed-to substitute statement may be needed, such as, "Some current difficulties in the home make consistent parental support difficult at this time." Because the focus is on the pupil's functioning, the impact of the situation on the pupil's functioning is more important than what actually happened in the family.

**VII. Current Functioning**

Sensitivity of family members to the child's problem and the family's ability, time, temperament, and willingness to be helpful are important. The parents' view of the child's personality, the interrelationships between fam-

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ily members, the family's interests, activities, hobbies, and leisure activities all give clues to possible recommendations to help the child. Special attention is given to a child's interests at home, how he or she seems to learn best, areas of giftedness, hobbies, and special opportunities the child has for learning. Any maladaptive tendencies toward temper tantrums, fears, impulsivity, enuresis, sleep disturbances, stealing, or other difficulties should be noted.

**VIII. Evaluation, Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

The final part of the CSA is a concise summary of the meaningful information, including how these experiences affect the child's educational progress. This forms the basis for the social worker's recommendations regarding the educational needs of the child, the best learning environment, parent counseling, available school-based services, and further diagnostic evaluations. Specific recommendations about how parents can be helpful and supportive are appropriate. Because the CSA is a diagnostic tool and is often essential in assessing the severity of emotional problems and mental retardation, the data must be carefully collected and evaluated to ensure its accurate contribution to a differential assessment.

**IX. Signature**

The CSA ends with the name and professional qualification of the writer (Susan Smith, MSW and/or LCSW) and the date of completion of the document.

Confidentiality is a frequent concern in writing a CSA. The social worker may be given sensitive information that has a direct bearing on the pupil's problem, but it may be inappropriate to share the information with other school personnel. "Sometimes social data is very personal and its potential prejudicial effect may outweigh its diagnostic values" (Byrne, Hare, Hooper, Morse, & Sabatino, 1977, p. 52). If the assessment focuses more on a student's strengths and coping mechanisms rather than the details of his or her "problems," then confidentiality quandaries can dissipate (Gleason, 2007). Another important approach to managing confidentiality in the CSA is to ensure the parents early in the initial interview that this confidential information will not be shared with the school unless the parents give their permission or unless withholding it would endanger the health or welfare of the child. One procedure in keeping with this approach is to prepare the study in the form in which it will be presented and give the parent(s) the opportunity to read it and correct factual inaccuracies. This procedure gives the parents concrete emotional assurance that confidentiality will be honored and adds trust to the social worker-parent relationship. Often the social worker and parent can collaborate on wording that will convey concern without revealing sensitive details. In rare cases, information to which the parents object may need to be included. Such information is included only

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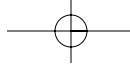
if it is accurate and critical to decisions to be made about the child's educational needs.

### SPECIAL EDUCATION ASSESSMENT

The CSA is sometimes called a *Social Developmental Study* (SDS) when it evaluates a student's possible eligibility for special education services. The SDS is the social worker's contribution to the complete, multifaceted nondiscriminatory evaluation of the student's needs as required by law. This complete evaluation becomes the basis for the team's planning for and with pupils with special needs through development of individualized education programs (IEPs). The SDS is an analysis and synthesis of the information gathered from various sources into a concise presentation of those life experiences of the child, both past and present, that pertain to the child's educational experiences. It needs to address cultural, environmental and familial influences on the student's behavior and learning processes. It should contain an adaptive behavior assessment of the youngster's behavior patterns and functional abilities both in and outside of the learning environment. In the case of youngsters with discipline problems, it may need to contain a *functional behavior assessment*, the basis for a *behavioral intervention plan*. The SDS provides information to the team that can guard against inappropriate labeling or placement of a child. Such inappropriate placement is more likely to occur when test scores and school performance evaluations are the only data used. The inclusion of developmental and ecological information provides a more complete view of the child and expands the range of possibilities appropriate to address the needs of the child (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hobbs, 1976). The SDS is written in educational language (behavioral descriptions, not psychological diagnoses) and should not include the social worker's recommendations for interventions that address the stated concerns. These will be developed later at the team meeting and by the entire team. Thus, specific identification of a special education category or recommendation for placement is not appropriate. A special education category designation, such as behavior disordered, learning disabled, and so forth, is the result of the compilation of the findings of the full multidisciplinary team, including the parents, as an outcome of the multidisciplinary conference. Only when the child's learning needs have been identified from a variety of different perspectives in the meeting can the multidisciplinary team determine the most appropriate and least restrictive environment (or placement) in which these needs can be met.

### ADAPTIVE BEHAVIOR ASSESSMENT

There is disagreement in the professional community on the definition of adaptive behavior (MacMillan, Gresham, & Siperstein, 1992; 1995). A sim-



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plified definition of adaptive behavior is the effectiveness with which the individual functions independently and meets culturally imposed standards of personal and social responsibility. The American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR) specified in 1992 that mental retardation refers to substantial limitations in present functioning. It is characterized by significantly subaverage intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with related limitations in two or more of the following applicable adaptive skills areas: communication, self-care, home living, social skills, community use, self-direction, health and safety, functional academics, leisure, and work. Mental retardation manifests itself before age 18. The concept of adaptation historically has been used to differentiate a person's general functioning from his or her measured intellectual functioning (IQ) and was used before the term adaptive behavior was adopted. Assessment of children's levels of adaptive behavior is intended to be a significant step toward two important objectives: 1) that children from minority and culturally diverse groups are not overrepresented in special education designations as a result of cultural influences rather than true disabilities, and 2) that children of all ages and cultural backgrounds are appropriately diagnosed and placed. A child may display behavior that the school environment considers to be maladaptive or emotionally disturbed, but it may be simply *emotionally disturbing* to the adults at school. The overrepresentation of minority children in special education suggests that the intention of this policy has not yet been realized.

Adaptive behavior is understood to be dependent on three primary factors: age, cultural expectations, and environmental expectations. As children get older, they are normally expected to function more independently. The age when this increased independence is to be demonstrated varies dramatically across different cultures. On the other hand, children may have to learn to work with others in coordinating relationships, to trust others, or to appropriately depend on them. It is the immediate environment of a child that ultimately determines what is adaptive or maladaptive. Since children spend the majority of their lives outside of school, it is important to understand how they function in the community and home environments—how a child's behavior is viewed as adaptive in the child's regular environment outside of school. For example, a student who appears significantly delayed in school may function quite independently in the community.

### Viola

Viola, a kindergartener, was verbally and physically attacking other students. She attacked a third-grade boy after he pulled the kindergartener's hair braids in the hallway. After she was returned to the classroom, she threatened the rest of the class if any of them "mess with her too." The school social worker contacted the kindergartener's mother to make a home visit and discuss the incident. The mother was very concerned for Viola and supported the need

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for her to change her behavior. The family was poor, but the household composition was most important. She had two older brothers, who were already in special education classes for emotional/behavioral problems, and both were very rough around home. The mother acknowledged that Viola had learned to deal with any provocation with an immediate counterattack, to avoid getting hurt even more. When the social worker returned to school she discussed the home dynamics with school personnel. It was decided that, rather than beginning the process of seeking an evaluation for special education referral, school personnel would work with Viola to help her recognize that the school is different from home. There were many adults at school to intervene on her behalf. Over the course of the next two months, Viola steadily improved in her willingness to let teachers and others provide protection when other students provoked her.

#### Informal Adaptive Behavior Assessments

The social worker, a generalist and an expert in family patterns and cultural differences, is often identified as the professional responsible for administering this assessment, reporting results to the team and contributing to its interpretation. Adaptive behavior information is typically gathered either through paper-and pencil instruments or qualitatively and informally through observations and interviews. It is useful to understand the applications of informal, qualitative assessment, as well as the use of formal, quantitative assessment instruments. Informal, qualitative assessments, using interviews and systematic observations (see chapter 24), compare the child's functioning in the classroom with his or her functioning out of the classroom: at home, in the community, and during external school activities. The areas of functioning, outlined in table 22.1, include *independent functioning*, *personal responsibility*, and *social responsibility*. When addressing independent functioning, the informal, qualitative assessment will answer the question "Does he or she have (or can he or she acquire) the necessary skills in each area?" When addressing the child's personal responsibility, the assessment will answer the question "Does he or she use the skills in each behavior setting?" When addressing social responsibility, the question to be answered is "Does he or she use the skill appropriately, that is, in the appropriate place, at the appropriate time?" Table 22.1 presents a conceptual model that may be used in acquiring this information systematically. The child's age and sociocultural background are, of course, essential ingredients in such an informal, qualitative assessment, as they are in formal assessments, using quantitative instruments.

#### Formal Adaptive Behavior Assessments

Formal, normed assessment of adaptive behavior is most appropriate in the determination of two special education eligibility categories: mental retardation and emotional disturbance. As previously discussed, the assess-

**TABLE 22.1** Informal Adaptive Behavior Assessment: A Conceptual Model

<i>Environmental Settings</i>	<i>Areas of Functioning</i>		
	<i>Independent Functioning</i>	<i>Personal Responsibility</i>	<i>Social Responsibility</i>
<i>Academic school:</i> subject areas	Does he/she have/can	Does he/she use the skills?	Does he/she use the skills
<i>Nonacademic school:</i> playground, halls, gym, to and from school and classes	he/she acquire the necessary skills?		appropriately (time and place)?
<i>Out-of-school:</i> home, neighborhood, peers, parents, other adults			

All criteria must be appropriate to the age of the child and to the sociocultural setting.

SOURCE: Suggested design by George Batsche, director, School Psychology Program, Eastern Illinois University, NASW Workshop on Adaptive Behavior, March 1981.

ment of mental retardation requires more than an identification of academic and intellectual deficits. The use of appropriately normed instruments is intended to avoid the disproportionate placement of children in special education classes simply because they are culturally different from the majority of the school population. Yet it is quite common that instruments may be considered culturally biased. There are literally hundreds of instruments with varying degrees of precision available. The choice of an instrument is probably best done by the team, where there is often expertise on tests and measurements and a good deal of combined experience. There are ten criteria that should be applied to every scale. There are no scales that will meet all of these, but a number will meet most:

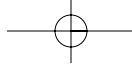
1. Scales should be relevant to the referral question. Use the correct measure for each individual and never expect the child to conform to the scale.
2. Scales should contribute to collaborative decisions about how to help a child. They should help to determine the restrictiveness of the milieu, the frequency of treatment, which interventions (medical and psychological) receive priority, the urgency for intervention, and the prognosis for improvement.
3. Scales should have clear instructions for both administration and scoring. For example, they should clearly indicate the reading level required for the respondent.
4. The normative sample used by the scale should be diverse and stratified by age, gender, race, or disability status. The best scales update their norms every ten years.

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5. Scales should be reliable, consistent with a correlation coefficient of .80 or above.
6. Scales should be valid, measuring what they purport to measure and reporting how this was determined, using content, criterion, or construct validity measures.
7. Scales should triangulate their sources. Ideally, rating scales will have separate versions for the parent(s), teacher(s), and student.
8. Scales should avoid a response set. This is most commonly done by having some questions reverse scored, so that a “5” on one item measures adaptive behavior, while a “5” on another item measures maladaptive behavior.
9. Scales should take into account diversity characteristics during administration. Persons with visual impairments may need an audio-taped version of the test and some will need a version in their own language.
10. Scales should enable the evaluator to present the results in a clear manner. This is often accomplished by plotting results onto a graph, sometimes with separate colors for each source. (Illinois State Board of Education, 2007, Appendix F).

A useful resource for reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of any specific instrument is the *Mental Measurements Yearbook* (Geisinger, Spies, Carlson, & Blake, 2007), which is available in most university libraries and online. Raines (2003) and Van Acker (2006) and chapter 23 also provide guidelines on how to identify which instrument may be best suited to the evaluator’s needs. It is particularly important to consider issues such as whether the instrument has data to demonstrate that the scales are reliable and valid for the characteristics being assessed, and whether it is possible to triangulate information from more than one informant. It is also essential to consider whether the social worker has the educational background and training to use the instrument being considered. Some instruments specify that the user is expected to have the background and training of a psychologist. Others qualify the instruction with the admonition that it is ultimately the responsibility of the evaluator to determine whether he or she has the training to adequately administer, report, and interpret the results of the assessment instrument.

The necessary training to administer and report the results of an instrument is often available from others in the district or through workshops. The person administering will usually make a report to the team. Here there must be some selection of relevant findings from a mass of quantitative scores, but the qualitative information gathered as part of the SDS will make a considerable difference. Interpretation is best done by the team as a whole, particularly persons with graduate training in tests and measurements and day-to-day familiarity with the instrument.

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In any case, the key element in the SDS is the social worker's analysis and synthesis of significant information from a variety of sources using multiple methodologies. This requires going well beyond the computer-generated reports produced by some assessment instruments. If the computer-generated report is used as a part of the SDS, the social worker needs to be prepared to explain and defend it. To do this, it is important to see the fit of the adaptive behavior assessment into the total social work assessment scheme. While formal instruments are very popular with school districts, the computerized report that is automatically generated by some of the instruments—even if it may look professional in its presentation of data—is not a substitute for a comprehensive social work assessment. Sometimes formal instruments are not available or appropriate. Sometimes their rigid format is not adapted to the situation or misses what the social worker has learned about the pupil's functioning, cultural background, or environmental conditions in other parts of the assessment. Thus, even if a formal instrument is used, the social worker may need to add to the findings or discuss them further with qualifications.

**FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIOR ASSESSMENT**

When IDEA was reauthorized in 1997 and 2004, it specified that when disciplinary action is being considered, students who receive special education services are to be provided with some additional procedural safeguards. A multidisciplinary team in the school is directed to conduct a functional behavior assessment. This in turn assists in developing a behavioral intervention plan for (and with) the student. The assessment is based on:

- ◆ An objective, detailed, and behaviorally specific definition or description of the behaviors of concern
- ◆ A description of the frequency, duration, intensity, and severity of the behaviors of concern and the settings in which they occur
- ◆ A description of other environmental variables that may affect the behavior (e.g., medication, medical conditions, sleep, diet, schedule, social factors, etc.)
- ◆ An examination and review of the known communicative behavior and the functional and practical intent of the behavior
- ◆ A description of environmental modifications made to change the target behavior
- ◆ An identification of appropriate behaviors that could serve as functional alternatives to the target behavior (see Clark, 2001)

The key questions in functional behavior assessments are the following: How is the student currently performing? and How does the student respond to interventions suggested by the problem-solving team? The focus is on gathering systematic information not only on the student but also on

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the factors in the school, home, and community settings that may be contributing to the difficulties. Analysis of the functional behavior assessment focuses on understanding:

- ◆ The purpose and function of the behaviors of concern
- ◆ The factors/conditions that may precipitate these behaviors
- ◆ The person's social, emotional, and behavioral functioning in relation to expectations
- ◆ The development of interventions
- ◆ The identification of needed supports
- ◆ The identification of desired behavior(s) that could serve as functional alternatives (see Clark, 2001)

There is a beginning guide to the development of a functional behavior assessment in the earlier discussion of assessment of the dynamics of the learning environment in this chapter. There is also a good sampler of developmental learning objectives in chapter 26 (table 26.2). Using these principles and this language, the school social worker can contribute to the team's mapping of the *functions* of a targeted behavior, and the *antecedents* and *consequences* of the behavior *as the student perceives them*. The key is to think of the student's perceptions of the functions, antecedents, and consequences of behavior. How does Viola understand certain boys' aggression in school and what she has to do to deal with it? Using the student's perspective, antecedents (triggers) can be lessened. The student can be assisted to manage them. And the student can be assisted to get what he or she legitimately wants and needs (e.g., safety) in a less disruptive and dysfunctional way.

In many ways the functional behavior assessment is not very different from the way social workers ordinarily think, except that it is quite behaviorally specific. It does not explicitly compare or classify the pupil in relation to an abstract norm of the behavior of other pupils (often the problem with normed, paper-and-pencil evaluative instruments). Rather it begins where the pupil is and looks at what may trigger a behavior and what might be workable next steps and goals for social participation. What antecedent conditions might possibly trigger the behavior? What functional payoff might there have been for the student? What did he get or avoid? Multiple methods such as interviews, observations, checklists, and so on should be used to gather the information. This process would then result in the development of a behavioral intervention plan (BIP) (see chapter 26) with interventions linked to the functional assessment.

Social workers have traditionally used observation and interviews as their basic tools for gathering information for assessing the dynamics of persons in their environments, preparing social histories, and conducting needs assessments. This chapter has addressed the application of these skills in the school environment. This chapter has also presented an introduction to

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some of the additional tools that are necessary for the school social worker to be of service to school personnel, students, and families. Conducting assessments of the learning environment is essential if we are to move beyond a focus on the student alone. Being prepared to assist in conducting functional assessments of behavior will be essential for not only meeting the needs of students, but also for demonstrating the social worker's ability to help schools meet the mandates that are being placed on them. Fortunately, functional assessments are very close to the analysis of person-environment relations social workers have always done, now applied to the educational setting. Gaining some experience with adaptive behavior assessment and being able to do either informal, qualitative assessments or to use formal instruments will require going beyond the traditional generalist skills provided in graduate schools of social work. However, the results can give additional credibility to the clinical impressions gained through the interviews and observations. This is especially important when we are being called on to assist in special education decisions about a student's possible eligibility for additional services. Our role is essential for ensuring that environmental and familial factors are taken into consideration as well as for helping parents be aware of their rights.

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