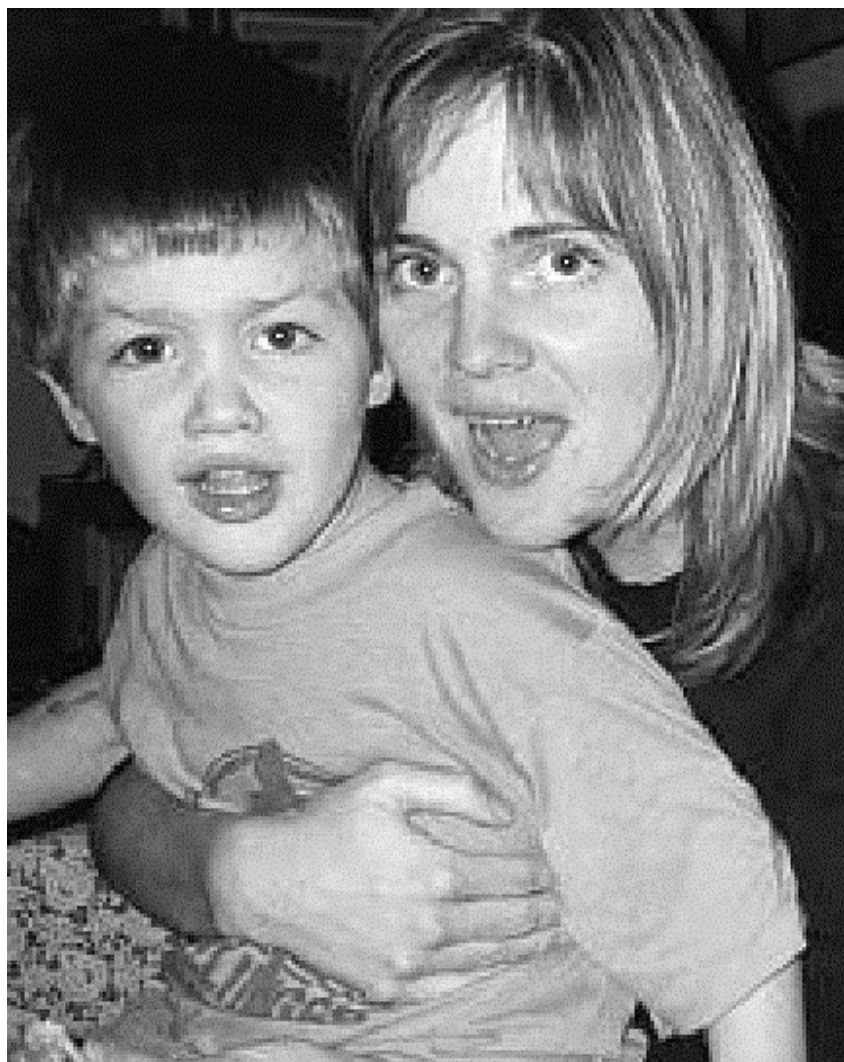


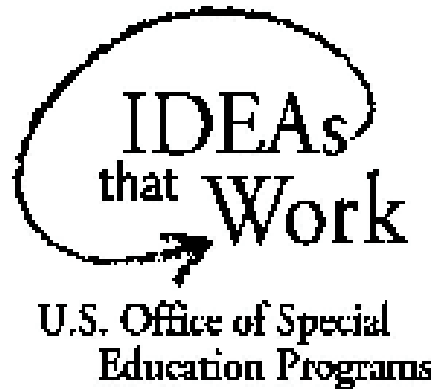
# **Parents' Guide to Functional Assessment and Support**

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*Parents' Guide to Functional Assessment and Support*

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## **FIRST, THE BAD NEWS**

How would you feel if you received a phone call from your child's school principal that begins with, "First, the bad news . . . ?" If your child is having trouble getting along at school, you may be wondering what the good news could possibly be. It might be that the school is planning to do a functional assessment, develop a positive behavior support plan, and work with you to locate resources to help your child get along better in school.

### **What Is Functional Assessment?**

Functional assessment is a process of identifying specific environmental factors that have an influence on when a particular behavior will occur. It is a type of assessment that can be used to plan positive ways to prevent or manage behavior problems at school (and at home – more about using it at home later). The assessment indicates, for an individual student, which situations encourage or discourage certain behaviors. We have all heard people say things like:

- "He just showing off to get attention; ignore him."
- "The way she acts is really a cry for help."
- "He's trying to get out of doing his work."
- "Those other kids get her upset."

Although these sayings are trite, and may or may not fit your child's situation, common sense tells us that children's behavior often comes with clues to the child's needs and difficulties, if we take the time to look. A functional behavioral assessment does exactly that – looks for clues to find out what seems to set off the problem behavior, what keeps it going, when it is most likely to happen – and, most of all, what can be done to help the child get along better at school. A functional assessment really can be good news because it is often the first step to positive support, resources, and cooperative relationships with teachers and the school principal that are needed for success in school.

This booklet is a brief introduction to functional assessment and support for parents who may be able to use the information at home and who might work with school staff to complete and use a functional assessment at school. Functional assessments are by nature variable because each individual child's situation will be unique in some ways. The model presented here is a general guide, not an exact prescription. The process usually begins when someone from the school sends home an informed consent about the functional assessment for the parent to sign. When a special education student is at risk for a change in placement or expulsion due to a serious discipline infraction or more than 10 suspensions, schools are required by federal law to conduct a functional behavioral assessment, if one has not been done already, within 10 days. After you read this booklet, we think you will agree that functional assessments should be used both at home and at school to prevent serious behavior problems rather than being postponed until a crisis forces the school to take action.

### **Functional Assessment at Home**



Young children often enjoy learning how to make cookies and this pleasant

experience may lead to more advanced cooking skills as the child gets older.

It is easy to understand, to assess, why children will help make cookies. It is a social activity that is fun to do with others in the family and, if you don't burn them, the cookies taste good. As the child's cooking skill and sense of responsibility increases, cooking behavior might be motivated by wanting to please and surprise a busy working parent on her birthday, even if getting an appreciative kiss from Mom is a bit embarrassing for a middle-school age child!



Let's use the example of cooking behavior to understand the four major elements studied in functional assessments:

1. **Setting events** are environmental factors that cause variations from typical behavior patterns. Here is an example: One family had taught a responsible older child, we'll call him "Joel," (not his real name) to help on days when Mom and Dad both had to work late, by fixing supper for the family. Joel would have a snack after school, do his homework, and then cook a planned meal that he knew how to fix. This usually went very well but two times it did not. Once, he felt sick and went right to bed as soon as he got home. The other time, Joel and

his mother had a big argument in the morning and he just put peanut butter and jelly and bread on the table instead of cooking supper. Being sick and getting into a big argument were setting events that made cooking supper lose its usual appeal for Joel.

2. **Antecedents** are events or factors that signal, prompt, or remind us that this is the time and the place for a specific behavior. In Joel's case, the day of the week and the time of day usually indicated when cooking would start because the family had set up a schedule. He would do his homework while watching television and when the 5:00 news came on, he knew it was time to start cooking. Being hungry might be an antecedent for cooking for some people, who have learned to tolerate waiting, but Joel was hungry when he came home from school and for him, that hunger prompted grabbing a quick, ready-to-eat snack, not cooking. He was not yet hungry again at 5:00 (although he would be by the time the food was cooked) so the antecedent for cooking was the planned signal, the 5:00 news.
3. **Behavior** like cooking is obviously something that is learned. Joel's parents had spent a lot of time as he was growing up in helping Joel learn to be a good cook and a safe cook. Unfortunately, less desirable behaviors also can be learned, and, as we will discuss in more detail later, adults do not always realize this is happening.
4. **Consequences** are the events that happen after the behavior and can be "good" or reinforcing – related to the behavior increasing, "bad" or aversive – related to a decrease in the behavior, "unimportant" or neutral – having no effect on the frequency of the behavior. We often think of consequences as something intended to be a punishment, as in the stern warning to someone who is misbehaving, "There will be consequences for that!" Actually, there are consequences of some sort for everything. For behaviors that occur over and over again, the important, or **maintaining** consequence, is the reason for or "function of" the behavior. For Joel's cooking, although clearly being able to eat

what he cooked was rewarding, the real maintaining consequence was the social attention he received from his family, who were enthusiastic about his cooking and who were generous in their praise.

Joel's parents knew that if Joel was to continue to enjoy cooking, they needed to be aware of the importance of the four elements of functional assessments: (a) setting events, (b) antecedents, (c) behaviors that were learned, and (c) consequences. Just as we can understand why our sons and daughters learn to cook, want to cook, and why they do or do not cook when expected to on certain days, we can think about situations, events, social interactions, and other factors related to all kinds of behaviors, both problem behaviors and desired behaviors, such as:

- getting in the car to go to school or for a ride, with a smile,



- or having a temper tantrum about leaving, or starting an argument about putting on a seat belt.

1. Can you think of setting events, antecedents, ways of learning these behaviors, and good, bad, or neutral consequences for these behaviors in the car?



2. What do you think a maintaining consequence might be for leaving clothing on the floor?
3. What might be a typical maintaining consequence for working hard to clean up a messy bedroom and then keeping it in order?
4. Can you see how the answers to these questions might be different for different children?
5. How might friends and visiting relatives affect the child's behavior, both toward being neat and toward being messy?



The maintaining consequences that result in many behaviors being repeated over and over fall into two big categories (with innumerable variations):

The first category is **getting something** the child wants or enjoys, such as, food, a toy, or a favorite activity, like a game with Dad.



Although often clearly a pleasant consequence, this category can be tricky because sometimes problem behaviors are maintained by what is called “negative attention.” In this situation, adults or other children scold or complain about a child’s problem behavior, intending to discourage it, yet the problem behavior keeps happening, and even gets worse. It may be that all the excitement or being the center of attention out weighs the criticism.

The second category is **getting out of something or getting away from something**, or someone, or some situation. We call this “escape” or “avoid”

maintained behavior. In planning a way to change behavior that is maintained by escape or avoidance, we need to know precisely what it is about the situation that triggers this reaction. It might be that the best way to improve the situation is to change whatever it is that is being avoided. What is frightening, aversive, difficult, or otherwise unpleasant? Is it necessary? Can it be changed? Or, can help be given? If not, can a way of coping or managing the difficulty be taught? Although the possibilities are endless, a problem solving strategy that has helped many people is to first brainstorm a variety of possible solutions and then narrow down the list of options to try first to the most practical.



**Thinking Systematically: Step by Step**

Functional assessment involves a systematic problem solving process that can be used at home or at school. Sometimes the process is simple and quickly leads to a solution. Other times, the process is more involved and it takes longer to find answers. If it seems likely that a simple functional assessment would be successful, that is the place to start. Here is a true example of a simple, functional assessment process that led to positive, successful, function-based support. A young child in elementary school, we'll call him "Calyn" (not his real name), was acting out quite a bit in class. Specifically, he disrupted lessons by speaking out of turn, name calling, and throwing things (pencils, erasers, shoes) in the classroom. His experienced teacher had a classroom management system that involved the following consequences for misbehavior: warnings, contacting parents, and office discipline referrals that led to detentions and suspensions. These consequences were not functioning like punishments in terms of their effect on Calyn's misbehavior because it was getting worse – more frequent and more disruptive -- instead of being reduced or eliminated. These are the steps the teacher and the parents took to assess the function of the problem behavior and to develop function-based support:

- 1. Interview:** The teacher and Calyn's parents went over a series of questions selected from a book that has become a classic in the field of functional assessment by Rob O'Neill and associates (1997). These questions are designed to clearly define the behavior of concern and to gather information about setting events, antecedents, behaviors, and consequences. The teacher had already looked over the questions and wanted to find out if the parents' answers to the questions would be similar to hers. In addition, the teacher hoped that the parents would be able to suggest some possible setting events because the teacher thought there probably were some setting events but she did not have any information on them. They also talked about Calyn's academic standing (average) and discipline records (unacceptable!), his physical health (good), strengths (sense of humor), and times when Calyn behaved well (recess, art).

Calyn's father told the teacher that if she would just have Calyn sit in the front of the room instead of in the back, he would behave.

2. **Observations:** After the interview, Calyn's teacher moved him to the front of the room and she also observed him more closely than usual for a few days, especially since he was clowning around and showing off so much when sitting in front of the class that she was determined to move him to the back of the room again. The teacher asked his parents to come for another meeting to talk about a different plan.
3. **Hypothesis:** The teacher had a hypothesis about why Calyn was acting out: When Calyn's classmates are doing their school work and paying attention to their lessons, he will call out, use name calling, and throw things in order to make them look at him and, sometimes, to laugh or argue, or throw something back at him.
4. **Brainstorming:** The adults used *Competing Behaviors Pathways* diagrams (see O'Neill et al., 1997, or visit the Web pages listed in the back for examples) as a basis for brainstorming ideas for making positive changes. They listed a variety of ideas for changing every aspect of the situation, and, according to the rules for brainstorming, they did not criticize each other's ideas because sometimes a silly idea leads to a great idea.
5. **Developing the Behavior Support Plan:** After the brainstorming session, Calyn's teacher and parents selected the ideas they thought would be most effective yet still practical. A key aspect of the plan was for Calyn to learn acceptable ways to get attention from his classmates. The teacher asked the parents if they had anything at home that Calyn's peers would think was "really cool!" and that would be something that he could earn the right to bring to school to talk about as an "expert." They did! The family had a pet parrot that could talk and dance! A contract was developed saying that Calyn could earn points by staying on task at school without disrupting the

class, one point for each school day in which he received no more than one warning and no office discipline referrals. When he had 20 points, he could bring his pet to school and tell the class all about the pet.

6. **Monitoring the Intervention:** The teacher set up a simple system for recording the points that Calyn earned and explained it to Calyn and to another teacher who also would be involved part of the time. It took Calyn 25 school days to earn 20 points.
7. **Evaluating the Outcome:** Although Calyn's behavior slipped on 5 of the next 25 school days, and he still needed one warning on many of the other days, overall, the improvement was dramatic and very welcome. Even more important, his peers did think that his pet was "very cool" and they seemed to think Calyn was cool now too. The best part of the intervention was that Calyn's relationships with his classmates continued to improve even after the intervention was over. That is, he seemed to have more friends and in turn to be less in need of acting out to be the class clown. It was like a turning point. He had learned how to get along during those 25 days of "training" and had gained some status by being able to give an interesting talk about parrots.

### References and Web Pages

The Center for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) has a Web site that will help you keep up-to-date with new developments: <http://www.pbis.org> Also see <http://brt.uoregon.edu/ebs/> and <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~ttobin/>

O'Neill, R. E., Horner, R. H., Albin, R. W., Sprague, J. R., Storey, K., & Newton, J. S. (1997). Functional assessment and program development for problem behavior: A practical handbook. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Todd, A. W., Horner, R. H., Sugai, G., & Colvin, G. (1999). Individualizing school-

wide discipline for students with chronic problem behaviors: A team approach. Effective School Practices, 17(4), 72-82.



When simple functional assessments and support plans are not enough, the teacher and the parents should seek help from others in their school, their district, and/or their community. Many schools have committees or “teams” of school staff members who can bring a range of professional expertise and a wealth of experience to the problem solving process. Although it may be difficult to ask for help, it is worth seeking help while the child is young because it is easier to set a young child on the path to cooperation with others than to try to turn an older child around after years of not getting along at school. Communities have access to more resources. In the next section, suggestions and organizers for seeking additional help are given.

# **FINDING & MAKING COMMUNITY RESOURCES WORK FOR YOUR CHILD**

Heidi von Ravensberg  
University of Oregon

## **REFERRALS, REFERRALS, REFERRALS**

We all share many things in common. Chances are, someone you already know has dealt with the same issue you are facing and can point you to help. So, ask the people you know for referrals. For example, every day, schools are directly or indirectly involved with a myriad of issues faced by students and their families. If someone at your child's school cannot help you directly, chances are he/she can provide you with a referral.

Ask your family doctor. Chances are, he/she can refer you to organizations that serve people with particular conditions. For example, eye doctors know they can refer interested blind and visually impaired patients to the state library Talking Book & Braille Services (TBABS 800-452-0292).

Other good sources of referrals are your telephone book, community resource directories and information and referral services. For example, White Bird (342-8255) has put out a Help Directory, which can be found at the U of O Knight Library in the reference section. In addition, Lane Care (988-5380) is a service providing referrals to community based mental health services in Lane County.

The Internet is an excellent place to find referrals. If you do not have access to the Internet, see the section "Internet - Free Public Access Sites" below. Two good web pages to check out are:

- 1) <http://www.efn.org> (click on the Community Pages link, click on the Essential Resources link). The Eugene Free Community Network provides numerous links to a variety of local resources.
- 2) <http://www.thelane.net>. The Lane Assistance Network provides information on numerous nonprofit community resources in Lane County.

### **TIPS:**

- 1) You can never gather too many referrals.
- 2) If the person or organization you are referred to cannot help, ask if they have any referrals to provide.
- 3) You know you have gathered most or all possible referrals when you begin hearing them repeated.

4) Don't think of gathering referrals as time wasted talking to a lot of people who cannot help you. Think of it instead as an opportunity to connect with others you would not otherwise meet.

#### **PERSISTENCE & PATIENCE ARE ABSOLUTE REQUIREMENTS**

The only time you will reach the exact person you want on the very first telephone call is when you call 911. Finding a good resource requires persistence and patience. Don't give up! Remember, the princess had to kiss a lot of frogs before she found her prince.

Locating the help you need will take numerous phone calls and days of waiting. For example, say you are looking for counseling and support services for a child recovering from sexual abuse. In the telephone book, you find Sexual Assault Support Services' non-emergency number (484-9791) and give them a call. The receptionist can't answer your question, so she puts you through to the Program Director to inquire about services for children. You get her voicemail and leave a message. The next day, she returns your call. SASS does not provide the exact services you seek, but she refers you to the Center for Family Therapy (346-3296) and the Center for Family Development (342-8437).

You are not done yet. Friends and colleagues tell you about Options Counseling (687-6983) and Voices of Oregon (683-8700). You contact all four organizations for more information. You wait a few more days for some voicemails to be returned and pamphlets you requested to arrive in your mailbox.

In all, you have made seven telephone calls and spent 12 days to get the information you need. The reward for your efforts is you know more about each organization and you have a good idea of which can best help.

#### **TIPS:**

- 1) In large organizations (more than four people), odds are the person answering the telephone cannot answer your question.
- 2) If the person answering the telephone cannot help you with what you need, ask to be put through to the person or department that can help.
- 3) Always ask for each person's extension or direct telephone number. This helps if you are disconnected and it gets you through faster the next time you call.
- 4) If you want information on what services an organization provides, ask for the Program Director or Service Coordinator. Request that information be mailed to you.
- 5) Ask lots of questions. For example, ask about age/income limits, fees and financial assistance, hours of operation and so forth. The last question you should ask is "is there anything else I should know?"



## **INTERNET - FREE PUBLIC ACCESS SITES**

If you do not have access to a computer, the following locations welcome the public to "surf the net" on their computers at no cost.

### **TIPS:**

- 1) Be sure to find out if you can print out your Internet results onsite or if you need to download them to disk or take along a tablet for notes.
- 2) Ask a staff member what other databases you can use to search for information on your topic.

Eugene Public Library - Bethel Branch 682-5766  
1990 Echo Hollow Rd., (Echo Hollow Shopping Plaza, in the old Wells Fargo Bank, next to the Dollar Store)  
Hours: Tues.-Wed. Noon-8PM, Thur. -Sat. 10AM-6PM.  
Note: 4 terminals, 2 terminals are available for use 1 hour per day, 1 terminal for kids 10 and under only, 1 terminal is the "Express" terminal (for use 15 minutes at a time). Staff help is limited, volunteer help is available every other Sat. 1PM-5PM.

Eugene Public Library  
Internet Public Access Center (IPAC) 682-6615  
100 W. 13th Ave (2nd Floor)  
Hours: Mon. & Tues. 2PM-7PM, Wed.-Sun. 2PM-5PM.  
Closed: New Year's Day, Martin Luther King Day, President's Day, Memorial Day, 4th of July, Labor Day, Veteran's Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day.  
Note: library is wheelchair accessible.

University of Oregon Knight Library 346-3065  
The library is located on the east side of Kincaid Street Between 14th and 15th Avenues  
Hours: 346-3054 voice message gives hours for academic sessions, dead and finals weeks, summer session and intersession.  
Closed: New Year's Day, 4th of July, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day.  
Note: computers are located on the 1st floor of the library in the Reference area.

Lane Community College 726-2220  
4000 E. 30th Ave. (1st Floor of library located in the Center Building)  
Hours: Mon.-Thur. 7:30AM-10PM, Fri. 7:30AM-5PM, Sat. 9:30AM-3:30PM. Shorter hours between terms.  
Closed: national holidays.  
Note: Information cannot be printed-only downloaded to disk. Database information can be printed.

## **EDUCATE YOURSELF**

Information is power and provides confidence. When your life takes an unexpected turn and you find yourself in unfamiliar territory, retake control by educating yourself. The more familiar you are with a subject, the better you can advocate for your child. The Internet and online library databases provide extensive expert, personal and practical information.

Ask your librarian what online databases are available for you to search. On the Internet, use the <http://www.dogpile.com> search engine. It is the best because it searches all the popular search engines like Yahoo, Excite and Hotbots simultaneously.

As an example, your child may be diagnosed with an emotional or behavioral disorder that threatens his education. You know little or nothing about the disorder, parenting a child with this disorder or if he has rights under special education law. Using <http://www.dogpile.com>, enter any or all of the following words: "emotional," "behavioral," "disorder," "Oregon" and "IDEA." Your results will locate pages like:

- Positive Behavior Supports at School, by Tary Tobin (<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~ttobin>)
- The Oregon Family Support Network, (503-581-2047, or, for parents, 1-800-323-8521) <http://www.reachout.org/portland/mental/mental04.htm>)
- The IDEA of 1997-Overview and Q & A from OSEP ([http://www.ldonline.org/ld\\_indepth/legal\\_legislative/osep.html](http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/legal_legislative/osep.html))
- The Oregon Advocacy Center (<http://www.oradvocacy.org/>)

## **TIPS**

You must know the law and regulations that apply to your child to get the full benefit of the government resources (i.e., the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Oregon Health Plan (OHP), etc.).

## **GET INVOLVED -BECOME PRO-ACTIVE**

Not every problem has a resource available to help fix it. In that instance, you will need to take action yourself. Self-advocacy, Forming your own nonprofit organization and lobbying politicians for change is beyond the scope of this guide. You can, however, find help on the Internet:

- People First of Oregon - Self Advocacy - Developmentally Disabled (<http://www.open.org/~people1/index.htm> )
- Oregon Secretary of State Office (503-986-2200, <http://www.sos.state.or.us> , click on

Corporation Division link).

- Oregon State Legislature (<http://www.leg.state.or.us> )

### **ORGANIZATION**

Whatever you do, do not throw out all your hard work! As you gather all those names, telephone numbers, pamphlets, catalogs and articles, you are creating your own information database. You will want to refer to it later. Before long, you won't be asking others for help--they'll be asking you!

### **TIPS:**

- 1) An empty box or drawer to put your resource information in is an easy and simple start to organization.
- 2) Use the "Checklist of Information to Give" attached to this guide to prompt you as you talk to resources.
- 3) Use the "Checklist of Information to Gather" attached to this guide to prompt you to ask for information from your resources.

## CHECKLIST OF INFORMATION TO GIVE

- My name is \_\_\_\_\_
- I am the parent/guardian of a child with (name disability) \_\_\_\_\_
- My child's name is \_\_\_\_\_
- He/She is \_\_\_\_\_ years old
- We live in (City) \_\_\_\_\_
- He/She is in the \_\_\_\_\_ grade
- He/She attends school at \_\_\_\_\_ in the \_\_\_\_\_ school district
- I have copies of his/her (report card/attendance sheet/other) \_\_\_\_\_
  
- I want to speak to someone about:
  - Getting information on what services you give
  - Applying for services
  - Getting help with \_\_\_\_\_
  - Getting a referral for someone who can \_\_\_\_\_
  - Filing a complaint about \_\_\_\_\_
  - I need to speak with someone/have my message returned about this \_\_\_\_\_
  - Immediately, it is an emergency
  - Urgently, before (give time/date/event) \_\_\_\_\_
  - As soon as possible
  
- I live at (street address) \_\_\_\_\_
- My mailing address is (if different) \_\_\_\_\_
  
- You can reach me by phone at \_\_\_\_\_
- This phone number is at my:
  - Home/work
  - Family member's home/work
  - Friend's home/work
  - Neighbor's home/work
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
  
- The best time to reach me in person at this phone number is:
  - Any time
  - Days
  - Evenings
  - Nights
  - Weekends
  - By appointment
  - I pick up my phone messages:
    - Throughout the day
    - \_\_\_\_\_ Times a day
    - \_\_\_\_\_ Times a week
    - Only on \_\_\_\_\_

## CHECKLIST OF INFORMATION TO GATHER

- Date you called?
- Time you called?
  
- Name of person/organization called?
- Telephone no.?
  
- Name of person(s) you spoke to?
- His/her job title?
- His/her extension no. or direct tel no.?
- His/her e-mail address?
  
- Mailing address?
- Physical location (if different)?
- FAX no.?
- Web address?
  
- Services/programs offered?
- Transportation available?
- Free material available?
- Price lists/catalogs available?
  
- Fees charged?
- Who pays?
- Scholarships/grants available? Who may apply? Application deadlines?
  
- Age requirements?
- Income requirements?
- Is a referral required? If yes, by whom?
- Is an application required?
- Other requirements?
  
- Are business hours limited?
- Is staffing limited?
- Are there other limitations on services?
  
- Who else do you suggest I call?
- Is there anything else I should do?