

Functional Communication

Introduction

This is an overview of ways in which you can teach your child functional communication. Please note that this information is not intended to correct maladaptive behaviors that may require a professional assessment and intervention. We also are not discussing apraxia, articulation challenges or problems related to physical conditions, as these situations required the expertise of a trained Speech and Language Therapist.

Why Children Have Difficulty

Functional communication skills are forms of verbal and nonverbal behavior that a child uses to express their needs, wants, feelings and preferences in a way that others can understand them. When a child learns functional communication skills, they are able to express themselves without using behaviors like crying, fussing, grabbing or pushing away.

Examples of functional communication include using words, pictures or gestures to communicate a request for foods, toys, activities, or the need for help. Words used to protest or reject something also serve a function, and are part of functional communication.

Not all words that a child learns are part of functional communication. For example, when a child learns the names of colors or objects these are not considered part of functional communication, because these are labels and do not indicate a need.

Similarly, functional communication does not always have to involve words. Children who are not yet verbal can use sign language, gestures or pictures of items that they want. As long as they are communicating a need, they are using functional communication.

Children with autism often have difficulties with learning new words, and also learning how and when to use them socially. Many children will display behaviors such as pushing, yelling, crying or hitting when they are unable to communicate their needs effectively. Learning functional communication may reduce these types of undesirable nonverbal behaviors.

Let's look at how you can teach your child basic functional communication skills. Learning to make a request for something that they want or need is an important part of functional communication. Here is how you can teach your child "**requesting**".

1. Identify what item or activity you want them to learn to request for. First, identify something that you know your child likes, such as a favorite food or activity. Then think about how your child usually lets you know that they want this item. Do they pull your hand to it? Do they use hand gestures, or signs? Do they cry for it?
2. Identify how you want them to make a request. Consider the most appropriate way for them to communicate that they want this item. If they use words, would you like them to learn new words? If they are not yet verbal, do you have a gesture or a picture that you would like them to use, or would you like to teach them sign language to communicate their need? Once you have identified what you want to teach them to communicate and how you want them to communicate, you can proceed to the next step.
3. Set up the environment. Let's take an example of wanting to teach your child to communicate their desire to eat cereal. You can set up the environment by choosing a time when your child is hungry, and then putting a box of cereal in a place where your child will be able to see the box, but not reach it.
4. Model functional communication for them. When your child indicates that they want the cereal, you can say something like "It looks like you want cereal." Next, model the communication form you would like them to use. If you are teaching the point gesture, point to the cereal box and say "I want cereal." Or if you are using non-verbal communication, show them a picture of the cereal box on a cupboard door, tap or touch it and say "cereal". And if your child uses words, model the word "cereal" and wait for them to say the word. Give them a chance to imitate you, and then model the communication form again if they don't imitate you right away. If you are using a picture or gesture, you can guide their hands to the

picture, or guide their hands in the form of the gesture.

5. **Shaping.** Shaping is a process by which you teach a desired behavior or communication form by acknowledging successive approximations of the desired behavior or communication. Depending on your child's age and communication abilities, you may need to shape your child's behavior until they are communicating their needs appropriately. This could happen in a few attempts, or may take weeks or months to learn. In our cereal example, you may find that at first they only point towards the cereal, or look at the picture of the cereal. You can reinforce their effort by giving them the cereal. If they are able to do this consistently a few times, you can try and get them to move to the next successive approximation, or something that is closer to what you have in mind for them. Model the desired communication each time they want the item. For a child who is verbal, making the sound "ss" for cereal may be the next step at which point you can reward them with cereal. The idea is for you to continue to reinforce their communication attempts, until they are as close as possible to asking for cereal by using words, pictures or gestures.
6. **Reinforcement.** If your child repeats your communication, you should reinforce their learned skill by giving them the desired item. You can also say something like "You asked for cereal, here is your cereal." Getting what they want is a natural and powerful reinforcer. One thing to remember is that you should NOT reinforce undesirable behaviors. So if your child cries for the cereal, and does not use functional communication, you should not give them cereal immediately. Rather, you should prompt them again, and wait until they have stopped fussing or crying. Then you can give them the cereal while prompting them for the correct response. It may be frustrating for both you and your child at first, but if you consistently use this technique, chances are your child will learn to use a gesture, picture or word to communicate what they need.
7. **Practice.** It may take several attempts for a child to learn to communicate functionally. You should consistently practice as many times a day as possible. At first you may need to prompt them, but you can slowly fade your prompts until they

are able to communicate their needs on their own. If your child does not want something you think they wanted, you can teach a new function which is rejecting. Gestural prompting might include a gentle pushing away of the item, a head shake "no" or the word "no" or "no thanks."

Conclusion

We hope you have found this information useful. By being consistent with your approach, you should be able to teach your child how to communicate their needs successfully. If some of your child's behaviors seem challenging and are limiting your efforts to teach them, you may need the support of a therapist to conduct a Functional Behavior Assessment and assist them with functional communication.

You can find many other learning modules on the Porchlight website, www.porchlighteducation.org.