

First Words: At Meal Times Practicing Functional Language in Daily Routines

What is functional language?

Functional language is vocabulary that people use in daily activities.

Throughout everyday situations, you can use new words and talk about what these words mean to help expand your child's vocabulary.

Why is it important to learn functional language?

Children with speech and language delays may have difficulty communicating basic wants and needs. They can benefit from targeted practice to develop functional communication.

How can we practice expressive language?

Expressive language is the ability to use words, sentences, gestures, and writing to communicate with others.

Expressive language:

- Name objects:
 - knife, fork, spoon, plate, bowl, cup, specific food/drink items
- Use descriptive words:
 - cold, hot, yummy, more, crunchy, soft
- Name actions:
 - eat, bite, chew, crunch, drink, open, close, help, pour, taste, smell

How can we practice receptive language?

Receptive language is the ability to understand what we hear and read.

Receptive language:

- Give simple 1-step directions such as “get the spoon” or “put the cup on the table.”
- Present each direction separately and pause to allow time for your child to respond.

Language strategies:

Naming/Labeling:

- Name food items as you or your child eat/drink.
- Name actions that you are doing as you serve/clean up, such as “I’m cutting the apple” or “We are rinsing the plate.”

Commenting:

- Talk about what you or your child are doing using simple words and sentences, such as “The milk is cold” or “Take a big bite.”
- As you eat together, you can talk about how the food looks, feels, tastes, and smells.

Repeat & Add:

You can model expanded utterances by repeating what your child says and adding a word. For example, if your child says “eat,” you might say “eat cereal.” If your child is using 2-words, you might say “eat cold cereal,” etc.

Offer Choices:

- Show your child two choices of food/drink items and allow your child to pick. Your child may point, reach for, or move toward the preferred item or may produce a sound or word.

- Model the appropriate language by repeating your child’s choice using words, such as “You want to eat pancakes.”

Expansion activities:

During play:

- Use pretend food to create and serve meals to your child’s dolls, stuffed animals, or action figures.
- Use play dough to create and name food items for a pretend picnic.
- Gather pretend food and silly, non-food items (such as a sock, a marker) and sort into food and non-food groups.

During shared book-reading:

Read simple picture books about eating and sharing meals. Describe what is happening in the book using simple 2-3 word sentences. Remember, you don’t need to read all the words on each page. Some book suggestions are:

- *Orange Pear Apple Bear* by Emily Gravett
- *Go, Go, Grapes!* by April Pulley Sayre

In music/songs:

Use simple and repetitive songs to highlight target vocabulary and concepts. Sing the children’s song “Apples and Bananas” with various food items, such as “I like to eat, eat, eat pizza and spaghetti.” Pause after singing “I like to eat…” and see what foods your child might suggest (like “cereal and candy”).

Tips:

Get face-to-face. When you interact with your child on their level, it is easier to remain engaged and pay attention. Your child can watch your mouth as you speak and can follow your gestures as you point to objects and demonstrate actions.

- *Minimize distractions.* Keep the focus on the interaction between you and your child. Avoid distractions such as electronics (TV, phone, tablet). Try to decrease multitasking during these interactions.
- *Use specific vocabulary.* Avoid vague statements, such as “Get that” or “Eat it.” Remember, your child needs multiple exposures to a new word before they start using it. Model the target words as often as you can.
- *Keep your language simple.*
- Provide *adequate pause time* to allow your child to respond.

Disclaimer: This document contains information and/or instructional materials developed by Michigan Medicine for the typical patient with your condition. It may include links to online content that was not created by Michigan Medicine and for which Michigan Medicine does not assume responsibility. It does not replace medical advice from your health care provider because your experience may differ from that of the typical patient. Talk to your health care provider if you have any questions about this document, your condition or your treatment plan.

Author: Santia Sims, M.A. CCC-SLP
Edited by: Karelyn Munro, BA

Patient Education by [Michigan Medicine](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Public License](#). Last Revised 08/2020