

First Words: Gardening

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:
 - flower, gloves, grass, hose, lawn mower, leaves, seed, shovel, tree, water, yard
- Use descriptive words:
 - muddy, dirty, green, big, little, wet, dry
- Name actions:
 - Water, dig, cut, pick, mow, rake

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 “push the seed in the hole” or “water the plants.”
- Present each direction separately and pause to allow time for your child to respond.

Language strategies:

Naming/Commenting:

- Name objects and actions as you work in the garden. If the weather isn't appropriate for gardening, allow your child to help water indoor plants.
- Use simple words and sentences to talk about what you see and what you are doing, such as “Daddy is mowing the grass” or “We are digging in the dirt.”

Pausing:

As you complete an action or use a gardening tool, hold up the item and start a phrase, such as “I dig with the...” Then pause and see if your child can fill in the missing word, such as ‘shovel.’ If not, then you complete the phrase and repeat it, such as “shovel. I dig with the shovel. The shovel goes in the dirt.”

Offering Choices:

- Allow your child to pick between two choices. For example, you might say, “Which should we plant first, sunflowers or daisies?” Your child may point, reach for, or move toward the preferred item or may attempt to produce a word.
- Model the appropriate language by repeating your child's choice using words, such as “Let's plant sunflowers first.”

Repeat & Add:

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

Expansion activities:**During play:**

Set up a small tub of dirt for you and your child for gardening pretend play, either indoors or on the porch. You can use small beans or beads to ‘plant seeds.’ If you have popsicle sticks, fake flowers, or plastic fruits/vegetables, you can pretend that your seeds are growing. Be consistent in modeling and emphasizing specific vocabulary.

During shared book-reading:

Read simple picture books about gardening. 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:

- *I Can Grow a Flower* by DK
- *Usborne Pop-Up Garden* by Howard Hughes
- *Garden Day!* by Candice Ransom

In music/songs:

- Use simple and repetitive songs and rhymes to highlight target vocabulary and concepts. Using a sing-song rhythm, describe your actions in the garden, such as “In the garden, pull the weeds. Dig a hole, plant the seeds! Cover them up, water them, too. Watch them grow in front of you!”
- As you sing each verse, perform the accompanying actions (digging a hole, planting a seed, watering the plant, pulling the weeds) and mimic the plant beginning to grow with your fingers rising up from the ground.

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 multi-tasking during these interactions.
- *Use specific vocabulary.* Avoid vague statements, such as “Water it” or “Put it in.” 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.

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