First Words: Pet Care
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:
    - food, bowl, brush, box/crate, treat, toy, dog, cat
- Name animal body parts:
    - mouth, ears, eyes, nose, legs, tail, paws, fur
- Name actions:
    - pet, feed, play, give, walk

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 "pour the food" or "give the dog a treat."
- Present each direction separately and pause to allow time for your child to respond.

Language strategies:

Naming/Commenting:

- Name the animals, sounds, and actions as your child interacts with family pets.
- Talk about what your child or the pet is doing while interacting, such as "Pet the kitty," "Dog says woof," or "Yummy food."

Offering Choices:

- Show your child two choices of activities, such as a leash and a toy, and allow your child to pick. 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 "You picked the leash. Let's walk the dog."

Repetition & Emphasis:

Your child needs to hear a new word several times before they start to use it. Model new words (such as 'brush' or 'treat') several times with emphasis (such as "Give the cat a *treat*" or "Please *brush* the dog").

Expansion activities:

During play:

- Help your child care for a toy animal by taking it on a walk, feeding it, and giving it toys and treats. Label actions and objects seen during the walk.
- Help your child play fetch with a dog. Label actions and objects while playing fetch, such as "roll" and "ball." Encourage your child to take turns and engage with you during these play sequences.

During shared book-reading:

Read simple picture books about caring for pets. 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:

- *Please, Puppy, Please* by Spike Lee and Tonya Lewis Lee
- *Cookie's Week* by Cindy Ward

In music/songs:

Use simple and repetitive songs to highlight target words. For example, use the tune of "The Farmer in the Dell" but substitute with pet or animal names, where they are, or what they're doing. You might sing "The dog is in his bed, the dog in his bed. Hi ho, the derry-oh. The dog is in his bed," or "Fido takes a walk, Fido takes a walk…"

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 "Give it to him." 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.