

First Words: In the Car

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:
 - car, seatbelt, stop light, stop sign, tree, truck, window
- Use descriptive words:
 - fast, slow, bumpy, loud, quiet
- Name actions:
 - drive, look, move, ride, sit, watch

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 “point to the fire truck” (while in the car) or “stop the car” (during play at home).
- Present each direction separately and pause to allow time for your child to respond.

Language strategies:**Naming/Commenting:**

Name objects that you pass while riding in the car. Use simple words and sentences to talk about what where you are going and what you will do once you get there, such as “We are going to the beach,” or “The car is going to the car wash.”

Pausing:

As you point out objects/actions that you see while driving, start a phrase, such as “I see the...” Then pause and see if your child can fill in the missing word, such as ‘tree.’ If not, then you complete the phrase and repeat it, such as “tree. I see the tree. The tree is big.”

Repeat & Add:

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

Expansion activities:**During play:**

- Gather your toy cars and use a large piece of cardboard to create a ramp with start and finish lines. Rest it against the couch or a wall and you’re ready to race! Use blocks to build a wall at the end of the ramp for the cars

to crash through. Model simple and repetitive phrases such as “your turn, my turn; ready, set, go!”

- Bend a piece of paper into a tunnel and tape the edges to the floor. You and your child can take turns driving through the tunnel, while you model words such as “in, out, go stop.”
- Grab a variety of vehicles and move them through play dough to notice the different types of tracks each makes.

During shared book-reading:

Read simple picture books about cars, driving, and riding in the car. 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:

- *Cars Go* by Steve Light
- *Calling All Cars* by Sue Fleiss
- *Red Car, Blue Car (My Little World)* by Jonathan Litton
- *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Car* by Kate Dopirak

In Music/Songs:

- Use simple and repetitive songs to highlight target vocabulary and familiar routines. One of the books suggested above, *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Car*, has text that is set to a familiar tune.
- You can also use the tune of “Are You Sleeping?” to describe the actions of a car. Sing “Green says go, green says go. Go, go, go! Go, go, go! Yellow says slow, yellow says slow. Slow, slow, slow! Slow, slow, slow! Red says stop, red says stop. Stop, stop, stop! Stop, stop, stop! Go, go, go! Slow, slow, slow! And now stop! And now stop!”

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 “Look at that” or “Close 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