



Functional Communication: The Basics

You may have heard the term “functional communication” from a therapist or BCBA without a clear sense of what it means day to day. In simple terms, it’s giving your child a reliable, appropriate way to get their needs met, so they don’t have to reach for behavior to do it instead.

“The goal isn’t to stop the behavior. It’s to make the behavior unnecessary.”

HOW TO START AT HOME

- 1 Watch for what a behavior seems to get your child.** Not just what the behavior looks like, attention, escape, an item, or a sensory need are the most common.
- 2 Teach a specific, simple replacement for that exact function.** A word, sign, picture card, or device button, whatever fits your child’s communication level.
- 3 Respond to the replacement quickly and reliably.** Especially early on, so it’s clearly worth using.
- 4 Use the same replacement consistently across every caregiver and setting.** So it generalizes rather than only working with one person.

AS THE SKILL BUILDS

- ☐ Gradually add small delays or expectations before honoring the request, once the basic skill is solid, a short wait, a small task first.
- ☐ Expand the replacement to more settings and people, one at a time.
- ☐ Keep an eye on which function is still hardest to communicate, and focus new teaching there.

TRY THIS

If a behavior seems to be about escaping a hard task, teach and immediately honor a simple “break” request (a word, sign, or card) the moment it’s used, even for just a short break, so it clearly works as well as, or better than, the old behavior.

WORKING WITH YOUR CHILD’S TEAM

If you’re working with a BCBA or speech therapist, ask specifically what function they believe is behind a target behavior, it shapes exactly what to teach.

Share what’s working (or not) at home; functional communication plans usually need adjusting as a child’s skills grow.

Be patient, replacing a well-established behavior with a new communication skill takes consistent practice over weeks, not days.

BxLight is designed by a BCBA for educational purposes only, and is not a substitute for individualized professional care — if you’re working with a BCBA, therapist, or other provider, they know your child best.

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