

UNM CDD/NMPED Educator Voices Podcast Evidence Based Practices - Functional Communication

Simply put, Functional Communication is “communication that gets you what you need or want in a way that is acceptable and understandable to the wide world beyond school, therapy and home.” (Trott & Laurel, 2021) While Functional Communication develops quite easily and without much conscious effort (on the part of parents and teachers) for most children – both typically developing and many with developmental delays, it is an important focus for many children with autism spectrum disorders and other disabilities that prevent easy use of language.

There are times when all of us use our behavior for communication. Consider raising a hand when you want attention in class or large group environment. In some settings, you may need to “go to the restroom” or “check your phone” not because you actually need to do those things but in order to take a short break from an environment that is boring, noisy, etc. These behaviors (and others) typically get us what we want or need without resorting to forms of behavior typically considered inappropriate. Students may use behaviors as well. We teach functional communication in order to prevent those challenging behaviors from becoming a barrier to participation in home, school and community.

Many behavior intervention plans include Functional Communication as a goal area. The somewhat challenging part of this is to determine the function of the behavior rather than deciding on a treatment based on the form of the behavior. Consider the following: Student A runs out of the classroom into a busy parking lot at various time throughout the week. Obviously, this is a dangerous behavior and must be stopped as soon as possible. The teacher thinks about ways to make it more difficult to get out the door (that needs to be open as an exit), and perhaps putting up a stop sign to help the student remember not to go out the door. Teacher may also think of reinforcing the student for staying in the classroom or determining a place where the student might go instead of out of the door. Some of these strategies may be helpful but the most effective strategy will be to determine why the student runs out the door and base an appropriate intervention on the function of the behavior. While that can be challenging and needs to be carefully considered it can be fairly obvious. Does A run out the door whenever it is math time or group work time? Maybe A runs when it gets noisy or hot in the classroom? Is there a busy street nearby and A hears emergency vehicles go by and wants to see them? Chances are that A gets a lot of attention when heading for the door. Each of these examples present different possible functions – escape from a difficult or less preferred task, escape from some environmental factors (heat or noise); wanting to see something interesting and looking for attention. The best and most effective intervention will get A can get what is wanted or needed (at least some of time) without engaging in a disruptive and dangerous behavior.

Functional Communication can take many forms:

- Spoken words
- Signs

- Gestures
- Assistive technology devices
- Picture cards
- Word cards

It is very important to choose a form (or forms) of functional communication that are easily understood by most individuals in most environments in which a person participates. The problem with signs (and some gestures) are that only a few individuals will understand. This is especially true for individuals whose motor skills prevent them from the precise use of standard forms of sign language. The form of communication must also be readily available in all environments. For that reason, electronic devices may be somewhat problematic.

Using Functional Communication training can be relatively easy, however, it can also be complex and confounding. It is very important to avoid reinforcing a behavior by using a consequence that may actually strengthen the behavior (e. g. lots of attention for running toward the door). Refer to the references below and contact someone who has expertise in Functional Communication training (behavior analyst, some speech/language pathologists or the Autism Programs school team).

Resources on teaching Functional Communication:

Reichle, J & Wacker, C (2017) *Functional Communication Training for Problem Behavior*, Guilford Press; New York, NY

Trott, M.C. and Laurel, M. (2021) Learning to listen; Communication and the functions of behavior. *Autism Advocate*, October 2021. Pages 21-23.

Additional information on Functional Communication is available at:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2846575/>