**HOW-TO: Supporting Language Development for Autonomy & Independence**

Let’s talk about language. Language is *the system we use to communicate*—the words, the grammar, the structure, and the communicative intent. It includes both understanding (receptive language skills) and expression (expressive language skills), and it also is all that stuff that is involved with the interaction part of communicating (social communication skills).

Language includes many different functions that we all use on a daily basis but are easy to forget to teach and encourage—requesting, asking for information, sharing information, greeting, protesting, agreeing, disagreeing, advocating, telling, demanding, story-sharing, joking, consoling, encouraging, explaining, describing, gaining attention, complimenting, apologizing, teasing, confirming, remembering… When we are supporting someone’s language development we need to be considering the variety of language functions and then providing the child with opportunities to hear, see, learn about and practice using different language functions in a meaningful way. When a child uses a communication device, or talker, the responsibility lands on us, the communication partners, to model and encourage these different functions.

What happens when we focus on a variety of language functions? The child’s communication system becomes robust. It becomes so much more than a way to request things that are likely already available to them. With robust language, they become able to be autonomous and independent, as well as being able to access and share learning, and using language to have fun. How do we focus on language functions?

* Encourage messages of opinion and self-representation—be an advocate for the message.
* Allow for protest and negation, and acknowledge the message even if it can’t be honoured.
* Become an ally in supporting the child to communicate their messages to others.
* Model simple messages of our own self-advocacy and opinion-sharing on the child’s talker.
* Practice sharing opinions within daily routines when nothing much is at stake.