
HOW-TO: Supporting Language Development for Autonomy & Independence

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

Language includes many different functions that we all use on a daily basis but are easy to overlook when teaching and encouraging communication—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 this 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, powerful. It becomes so much more than a way to request things that are likely already available to them. With robust language, they become autonomous and independent, well-adjusted and fulfilled; they are able to access and share learning, and use language to interact, have fun.

How do we focus on language functions?

- Encourage and advocate for messages of opinion and self-representation.
- Allow for protest and negation; acknowledge the message even if it can't be honoured in the moment.
- Be an ally by supporting the child to share their messages with others.
- Talker-model our own simple self-advocacy and opinion-sharing messages.
- Practice sharing opinions when not much is at stake, i.e. within routines.