

FUNCTIONAL COMMUNICATION TRAINING (FCT)

GOAL

To help you teach your child to communicate effectively using Functional Communication Training (FCT), a strategy that replaces challenging behaviors with meaningful communication.

BACKGROUND

When your child is crying, jumping, or yelling, you may feel confused and unsure how to respond. These behaviors can feel overwhelming, especially when they happen frequently.

But here's the key:

- Challenging behaviors are not random—they are your child's way of communicating.
- If your child knew how to express their needs differently, they would.
- FCT provides them with a clear, effective alternative to express what they need.

By using FCT, you bridge the gap between frustration and understanding. You help your child replace challenging behaviors with meaningful, appropriate ways to express themselves.

WHY USE FCT?

Every behavior serves a purpose—it helps a child get something they want or avoid something they don't. Instead of seeing behaviors as "good" or "bad," we focus on understanding what the child is trying to say.

Using FCT recognizes:

- All behavior is communication—your child's actions are a way of expressing needs.
- FCT replaces frustration with understanding
- Teaching communication builds trust

By implementing FCT, you empower your child with a voice, reduce stress, and create a stronger, more connected relationship.

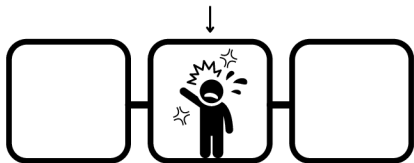
IDENTIFY THE FUNCTION OF BEHAVIOR

Before teaching a new way to communicate, you need to understand why your child is engaging in the behavior you're interested in changing. Take time to observe your child. This will show you what your child is communicating with their behavior.



WHAT HAPPENS BEFORE?

When your child engages in a behavior you want to change, notice what happened right before the behavior started. Were they asked to do something? Were they denied access to an item?



WHAT DOES THE BEHAVIOR LOOK LIKE?

Consider what the behavior looks like. Does it look the same every time or are there different variations of it? Does it look the same or different when you're not home?



WHAT HAPPENS AFTER?

Notice what happens right after your child engages in the behavior. Do they get attention, even in the form of a reprimand? Do they avoid a task? Do they get something the like?

WHAT PATTERN CAN YOU SEE EMERGE?

WHAT IS YOUR CHILD COMMUNICATING?

All behavior is communication.

Understanding what your child is communicating with their behavior is critical to the success of FCT. Through FCT, you will be teaching your child a better way to get what they want instead of relying on the challenging behavior, but if you don't know what they want, you won't know what to teach them.

Generally, people engage in behavior (all behavior) to get something good or to escape something they don't like. Sometimes this is more obvious than others, and sometimes it can seem a little complicated. As a baby, your child's behavior was probably pretty easy to understand. If they cried, they may have been hungry or tired. Maybe they needed a new diaper or wanted to be held.

As your child grows, their experiences with the world make their behavior gradually more complicated, but with a little practice, you can become an amazing detective. Below are some things that your child might access or escape.

ACCESS

Get something good

When a child uses behavior to "get something good," the child might access:

- Attention from an adult or peer
- A favorite toy or snack
- A fun activity
- A sensory experience

ESCAPE

Avoid something bad

When a child uses behavior to "avoid something bad," the child might escape:

- Attention from an adult or peer
- A difficult task
- A task that will take a long time to complete
- A sensory experience

Where this sometimes becomes a little complicated is that there's often more than one reason a child engages in a behavior. Your child might start crying because he wants a specific toy, but he might also want your attention or to avoid going to bed. During FCT, you will teach your child to communicate very specifically what they want. We will talk more about this in the next step.

WHAT IS YOUR CHILD COMMUNICATING?

CHOOSE A COMMUNICATION METHOD

How will your child communicate?

Once you understand why your child is engaging in a certain behavior, the next step is to decide how they can communicate what they need in a more effective way. Not all children use spoken words, and even those who do may struggle to express themselves when they are overwhelmed or upset. This is why it's important to choose a communication method that works for your child's unique abilities—one that allows them to express their needs quickly and easily, even in challenging moments.

Your child's new way of communicating should be:

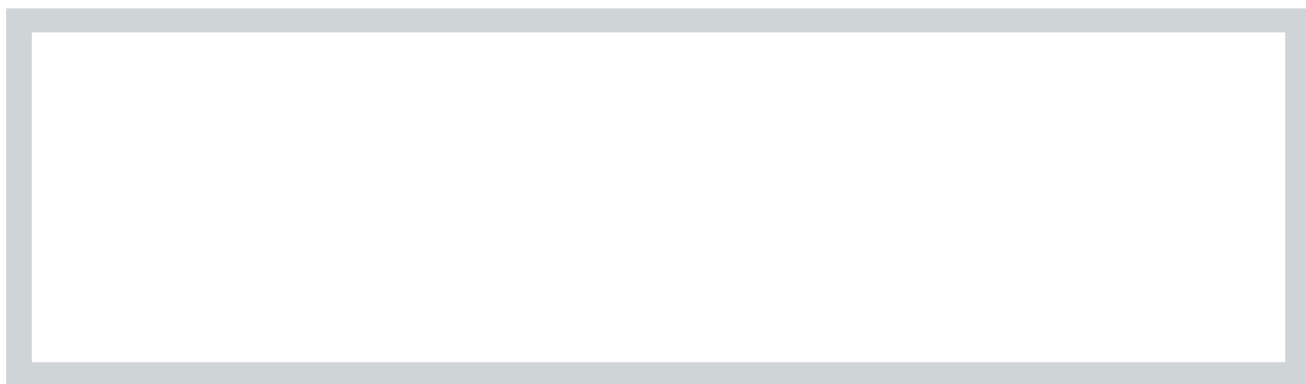
- ✓ Simple—easy for them to use.
- ✓ Effective—gets their needs met faster than the challenging behavior

Common Communication Methods

There are many ways a child can communicate their needs, and the best method depends on their current abilities. The goal is to choose an option that is simple, accessible, and effective.

- Verbal Words or Phrases – Some children can learn to use short, functional words such as "Help" or "Break" to express their needs.
- Gestures or Signs – Pointing, waving, or other hand signals can provide a nonverbal way to communicate.
- Picture Exchange or Visual Cards – A child may hand over a picture of an item they want, such as a toy or snack, instead of using behavior to request it.
- AAC Devices or Speech Buttons – For children who need additional support, an augmentative communication device or a button programmed with a specific phrase can help them express themselves.

WHAT COMMUNICATION METHOD WILL YOUR CHILD USE?



CHOOSE A COMMUNICATIVE PHRASE

You will need to choose a word or phrase that is most relevant to your child's needs. In many cases, a simple, specific word related to what they are trying to access or avoid—such as “Break” or “Cookie”—is enough.

However, some children might need to “get it all” in order to avoid the challenging behavior. For these children, a more general phrase like “I want my way” may be more effective in preventing challenging behaviors (Ghaemmaghmi et al., 2018). The goal is to select a phrase that your child can use consistently and successfully across different situations.

WHICH PHRASE WILL WORK?

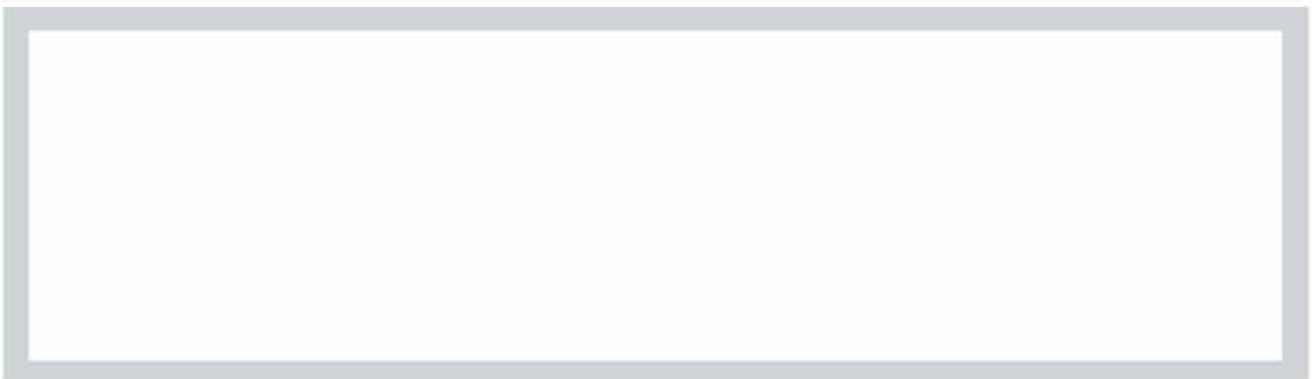
Ensure the phrase results in the same outcome as the challenging behavior.

Examples of Words or Phrases:

- If your child hits when they want to escape doing their homework, they could be taught to say “Break.”
- If they throw objects to get a cookie, they could learn to say “cookie” or hand over a picture of a cookie.
- If they become overwhelmed in loud environments, they could request “All done.”
- If they need to access toys and attention while also escaping the demands of homework, they might benefit from a general phrase like “I want my way” that results in them escaping the homework and accessing the toys and attention.

The phrase should be short, functional, and easy to use—especially when emotions are high. The simpler it is, the more likely your child will use it instead of engaging in challenging behavior.

WHAT COMMUNICATIVE PHRASE WILL YOU TEACH?



TEACH AND REINFORCE THE NEW SKILL

Once you've chosen a communication method, it's time to teach and reinforce it so your child learns to use it consistently.

Step 1: Set Up Practice Opportunities

- Identify moments when your child is likely to engage in a challenging behavior.
- Create low-stress opportunities to practice (e.g., placing a favorite toy just out of reach so they can ask for it).

Step 2: Prompt the New Word or Phrase

- Before your child engages in the behavior, prompt them to use the new communication method.
- Keep your prompts simple and clear (e.g., "Say 'Cookie'" or gently guide their hand to a picture).

Step 3: Reinforce Immediately

- Give your child what they asked for as soon as they use the new skill.
- Pair reinforcement with enthusiastic praise ("Great job saying 'Break!'").

EXAMPLE SCENARIO:

Your child cries when they want a snack.

- ✓ Before crying begins, prompt them: "Say 'Snack'" or point to a picture of a snack.
- ✓ When they use the new skill, immediately give them the snack.
- ✓ Praise them: "Great job asking!"

The faster and more consistently you reinforce the new skill, the more likely your child is to use it instead of a challenging behavior.

USE FCT ACROSS SITUATIONS

For Functional Communication Training to be truly effective, your child must be able to use their new communication skills across different settings, with different people, and during different activities. If they only use the skill in one specific situation, they may still rely on challenging behaviors in other environments. To help them succeed, it's important to provide plenty of opportunities for practice and ensure that everyone who interacts with your child encourages the same communication approach.


Do this:

- ✓ **Expand Practice Opportunities**
 - Teach and reinforce the new skill in different locations
 - Encourage your child to use the skill during play, transitions, and interactions with peers
- ✓ **Ensure Consistency**
 - Have teachers, caregivers, and family members respond to the new communication the same way
 - Keep responses predictable
- ✓ **Support Communication Growth**
 - Provide gentle reminders and cues
 - Acknowledge and reinforce all attempts
 - Be patient

Not this:

- ✗ **Limiting Practice to One Setting**
 - Only teaching the skill at home or during ABA sessions
 - Expecting your child to automatically use the skill in new places
- ✗ **Inconsistent Responses**
 - Only some caregivers reinforce the new communication
 - Failing to prompt the new phrase before the behavior
 - Responding differently each time
- ✗ **Expecting Immediate Mastery**
 - Withholding reinforcement if their communication attempt isn't perfect
 - Getting frustrated if progress is slow

WHERE CAN YOU PRACTICE FCT?



*The single biggest problem in
communication is the illusion
that it has taken place.*

~George Bernard Shaw