Beyond “I Want”: Teaching Children to Express What They Feel and Need

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Helping children develop a richer vocabulary for self-advocacy, emotions, and everyday life

One of the first things we often teach a child with significant communication deficits is how to request something she wants. We might teach her to exchange a picture for a snack, point to a favorite toy, or use a sign to ask for more. These are important accomplishments because the child begins to discover that communication can influence what happens around her.

But eventually, we need to ask a larger question.

What happens when the child wants to tell us something that cannot be expressed by choosing a toy or asking for a snack?

What if she is sad? What if something hurts? What if the room is too loud, she wants a particular person, or she is frightened about what is happening next?

A communication system that contains sixteen favorite activities but only a handful of words for everything else leaves an enormous part of the child’s experience unexpressed.

Communication Is More Than Requesting

When we begin teaching functional communication, requesting preferred items is often a sensible starting point. The child is motivated, the outcome is immediate, and the relationship between communication and reinforcement is relatively easy to establish.

But requesting is only one function of language.

Children also need to reject, protest, comment, ask questions, express emotions, seek assistance, share experiences, and communicate discomfort. They need ways to say that something is wrong, even when they cannot explain exactly what it is.

Consider the difference between these two communication systems.

One allows a child to request a trampoline, a scooter, a snack, and a favorite video.

The other allows her to do all those things, but also to say, “I’m sad,” “Help me,” “Too loud,” “I want Mom,” “I’m hurt,” and “I don’t understand.”

The second system gives the child considerably more control over her life.

Sometimes the Missing Piece Is a Word

Imagine a child who repeatedly watches a sad scene from a favorite movie. Each time, she begins crying. She may walk away from the screen, cover her ears, or seek out an adult.

What does the behavior mean?

Perhaps the scene makes her sad. Perhaps she finds it overwhelming. Perhaps she is using the movie to revisit a feeling she is already experiencing. We should be careful not to assume we know.

But the situation creates a valuable opportunity to teach language.

An adult might sit nearby and say, “That part is sad. You look sad. Are you feeling sad?” The adult could show the child a picture representing sadness and model how to communicate that feeling.

If the child indicates sadness, we can respond with genuine empathy. We might say, “I’m sorry you’re feeling sad. Would you like a hug, or would you like me to sit with you?”

Notice that we are helping the child express sadness rather than trying to eliminate it.

The same principle applies to excitement, frustration, fear, worry, and disappointment. These are ordinary human experiences, and children with communication deficits deserve ways to share them.

Choosing Vocabulary That Matters

We cannot teach every word at once. We have to make thoughtful decisions about which words will most improve the child’s ability to participate in daily life.

I would begin by considering what the child experiences regularly and what she currently struggles to communicate.

For example, a useful communication system might include words and symbols for:

• **Basic needs:** eat, drink, bathroom, hungry, thirsty, hurt, help.

• **Emotions:** happy, sad, angry, frustrated, scared, tired, excited.

• **Sensory needs:** quiet, headphones, too loud, move, squeeze, outside.

• **Social connection:** Mom, Dad, teacher, friend, hug, play with me.

• **Choices and self-advocacy:** yes, no, stop, more, different, finished, wait.

• **Participation:** go, turn, again, look, do, help me, I don't understand.

This is not intended as a fixed vocabulary list. A speech-language pathologist and the child's team should individualize the communication system, including access to versatile core words that can be combined across situations.

A child who frequently becomes uncomfortable in noisy environments may need a way to request headphones. A child who has difficulty recognizing when she needs the bathroom may benefit from accessible bathroom vocabulary. A child who struggles when a parent leaves may need language for missing someone or feeling sad.

We choose words because they will make a difference in the child's life.

Use More Than One Way to Communicate

Pictures, signs, gestures, communication devices, and speech can work together. These are not competing systems, and a child should not have to abandon one to make progress with another.

If a child uses a picture to request juice, the adult can model the spoken word "juice" while honoring the request. If the child is beginning to produce speech sounds, the adult may provide an opportunity to imitate a sound or word without making access to the drink depend on successful speech.

As speech develops, we can reinforce emerging vocal responses and gradually shape clearer productions when that is appropriate. In ABA, this process is called shaping through successive approximations.

A child might initially produce only part of a word. Rather than treating that attempt as a failure, we recognize it as progress and provide opportunities for further development.

We should celebrate the effort without turning every communication exchange into a speech test.

Make Communication Emotionally Meaningful

One of the most important parts of teaching emotion vocabulary is what happens after the child uses it.

Suppose a child points to a picture of "sad." If the adult simply says, "Good job saying sad," and immediately returns to an unrelated task, the child may learn to identify the picture without learning that expressing sadness leads to understanding.

Instead, the adult might respond, "You're sad. I'm sorry. Do you want me to sit with you?"

We want the child to discover that sharing a feeling changes the quality of her interaction with another person.

That is a much deeper lesson than identifying an emotion correctly.

We can then help the child communicate what might make the situation better. Perhaps she wants a hug, a quiet place, a familiar person, or simply some time together.

Communication becomes a bridge between what the child is experiencing internally and what other people can understand.

Teach Words Before the Crisis

If we only teach emotion vocabulary when a child is already screaming, we are making the task unnecessarily difficult. In the middle of strong emotions, attending, learning, and producing speech may all be harder for the child.

We should introduce and practice vocabulary during calm, ordinary moments. We can talk about feelings in stories, label emotions in movies, describe our own experiences, and model communication when small frustrations occur.

When a character in a story becomes sad, we can show the picture for sad. When a child enjoys an activity, we can model happy or fun. When something is unexpectedly difficult, we can say, “That was frustrating. Let’s ask for help.”

Over time, these words become familiar and increasingly available when the child needs them.

Give the Child a Voice That Others Can Understand

Parents often become extraordinarily skilled at interpreting their children’s behavior. They recognize tiny differences in facial expressions, gestures, sounds, and routines that strangers would never notice.

That understanding is valuable, but we should not require children to depend exclusively on people who know them exceptionally well.

We want them to be understood by teachers, relatives, friends, community members, and people they have never met before.

The purpose of expanding communication goes well beyond making the child easier to manage. It is to give her more independence, more meaningful relationships, and greater influence over what happens in her life.

A child’s vocabulary should grow to include not only the things she wants, but also the things she thinks, feels, needs, and hopes other people will understand.

References

The recommendations and examples in this article reflect the author's perspective. The sources below provide related background on functional communication training and on communicative competence for people who use augmentative and alternative communication.

Light, J., & McNaughton, D. (2014). Communicative competence for individuals who require augmentative and alternative communication: A new definition for a new era of communication? *Augmentative and Alternative Communication, 30*(1), 1-18. https://doi.org/10.3109/07434618.2014.885080

Tiger, J. H., Hanley, G. P., & Bruzek, J. (2008). Functional communication training: A review and practical guide. *Behavior Analysis in Practice, 1*(1), 16-23. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03391716

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https://accessiblebehavior.com/go/beyond-i-want-teaching-children-to-express-what-they-feel-and-need

About the author

Teacher at heart, behavior analyst, and writer, Dr. Peter Beddow has spent more than two decades helping children, families, and school teams navigate autism, behavior, trauma, and learning differences with clarity, structure, and hope. He studied English Literature and Creative Writing at Middlebury College and earned a PhD in Special Education from Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, where his work focused on fairness, learning, and access in assessment. Peter has worked as a teacher, special educator, clinical director, consultant, and board certified behavior analyst in homes, schools, and clinics. He founded Accessible Hope, a Nashville-area practice supporting diverse families, and writes and teaches practical, humane approaches to behavior and learning.

Scope and safety

This article provides general educational information. It is not individualized medical, behavioral, mental-health, legal, or emergency advice. Individual support should consider the learner's communication, health, safety, disability-related needs, culture, and context.

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