Manchester Local Care Organisation

Children's Speech and Language Therapy Service

Advice for Parents and Carers:

Using Functional Words

What are functional words?

Functional words help children say what they need or want. Some children who have trouble talking to others might know words for colours, numbers and shapes. They might also know animal names, food names or names of things that they like.

Parents often teach children the names of things because it is important to learn the names of things. But knowing names does not always mean a child can use these words to ask for things they want or need.

If a child can say "banana" when you ask, "What is this?", but cannot say "banana" when they want one, they are not using the word functionally.

Here is an example of a functional word:

If a child says, "milk please" the functional word is "milk".

If a child only said "please" you would not know what they wanted.

If a child said "milk" you would know that they wanted a drink of milk.

How to help your child understand functional words

If your child is not using words yet, or only uses some words, they might show you what they want by using their body, their voice, their eyes or their facial expressions. For example, they might look at what they want, point to the thing they want or reach for something.

If you know what your child wants, you should say the word for it. This is called modelling functional language.

For example, if they point to a banana, say "banana" when you pick it up and when you give it to them. If they give you a cup, say "water" or "drink".

These words "banana", "cup" and "drink" are functional words.

Modelling helps the child learn the functional word because they match what your child is asking for.

Do not ask the child to copy your speech.