



# THE BIG FOUR: BUILDING COMMUNICATION

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## A PARENT RESOURCE TOOL

### **About this Toolkit:**

Communication skills give individuals the ability to express their wants, needs, likes, and dislikes. As identified by research, communication skills are one of the four essential skill areas that are critical for individuals with ASD to learn in order to have decreased challenging behavior and increase quality of life (Ala-Rosales et al., 2018). The purpose of this toolkit is to help you explore your child's current communication skills and help you identify areas to further develop your child's communication skills.

### **Included in this resource:**

- Definition and examples of communication skills and why they are important.
- Questions to consider as you prioritize how to help your child develop communication skills.
- Considerations for when and how to teach communication skills.
- A sample of a completed Communication Skills Goal Form with examples of teaching communication skills.
- A blank Communication Skills Goal Form Template for you to personalize and organize the goals for your child.

*The content included is general information and is not specific medical or behavioral advice. The information provided may not work for every child with autism or their family. We recommend working closely with your child's doctor(s), therapist(s), and/or educator to discuss how the ideas shared may be individualized to meet your child's needs. If you have an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room right away.*

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## INTRODUCTION

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Each of the Big Four Toolkits provided on our website, [okautism.org](http://okautism.org), focus on one of the four skill areas identified by Ala'i-Rosales and colleagues (2018) as skills that individuals must master in order to prevent challenging behavior and have more opportunities to successfully participate in their community. As you make goals in each of these four areas, you may start to see how they are connected and tie together, for example, good communication skills effect ways to appropriately gain attention from others. Flow back and forth between each of these Big Four skills to help you further develop your Master Plan and pinpoint skill areas you want to prioritize.

While this toolkit primarily gives tips and provides examples of how to model and expand your child's language skills, you may begin to see how communication skills can influence or be influenced by the other areas of the Big Four. Developing additional skills in coping, play/leisure and/or appropriately gaining attention can also assist your child in experiencing more success as they build communication skills.

By continuing to build and expand on your child's skills in these four areas, you increase their ability to effectively navigate their learning environments in a way that can contribute to their overall quality of life over time, as well as prevent future problem behavior.

**Article referenced:** Ala'i-Rosales, S., Cihon, J. H., Currier, T., Ferguson, J. L., Leaf, J. B., Leaf, R., McEachin, J., & Weinkauf, S. M. (2018). The Big Four: Functional Assessment Research Informs Preventative Behavior Analysis. *Behavior analysis in practice*, 12(1), 222–234.  
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## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

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The ability to communicate wants, needs, likes and dislikes directly impacts our quality of life. By being able to do these things in a way that are understood by others in our community, it opens up more opportunities. This can include everything from participation in play with peers to knowing how to ask for feedback in the workplace. When we do not develop these skills, we are limited in how, when, and at what level we can be included or participate in our communities throughout our lifespan.

Communication is a skill that is needed daily. When a child does not have a functional way to communicate their wants and needs they can find other ways to get their needs met. Often times this looks like challenging behavior, such as harm to self or others in attempts to get their needs met. Essentially, not having a functional way to communicate leads to challenging behavior while developing communication skills will create more opportunities for an individual.

While it is critical to be able to communicate to others, it is equally important to be able to take instruction and understand the communication of others in our environment. Again, these skills are critical throughout the lifespan from taking instruction across environments such as home, school, and the workplace.

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## WHAT DOES COMMUNICATION LOOK LIKE?

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Communication for individuals with autism is a spectrum. While some individuals with autism have diverse vocabulary and are verbal, others are non-verbal and may use an Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) device or other low tech like pictures to communicate their wants and needs.

Professionals who work with individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) will sometimes talk about language as either receptive or expressive. Expressive language is the language that is used by the individual to communicate their wants, needs, likes, and dislikes, while receptive language is an individual's ability to listen and interpret language. Children use their expressive language to share their emotions and get their needs met. If a child does not have the ability to express these things it leads to challenging behavior. Receptive language, on the other hand helps a child understand rules and expectations when instructions are given. This skill can affect how a child is able to participate at school with peers or in the workplace.



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Ala-i Rosales and colleagues define this skill area as the ability to “Safely, effectively, and respectfully communicating wants, needs, likes, and dislikes in ways that are understood by others and do not result in harm to self or others.”

Based on this definition we can take a closer look at this skill area and assess where communication goals can be written for your loved one on the spectrum. Children and adults with severe speech or language problems may need to find other ways to communicate. There are many types of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) that they can use. This toolkit will help you identify what communication goals you may choose for your loved one. For more information on types of AAC you can visit <https://www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/aac>

If it is determined that an individual with autism would benefit from AAC or assistive technology, working with a speech-language pathologist, or SLP, can help determine how best to work with your child to learn how to use it.

If your child does use assistive technology or AAC, here are five technical tips that were presented by Independent Living Center WA which include: making the device accessible, having a charger at school, dedicating the device for communication only, protecting your device, and having a low tech system handy such as picture boards.

## Prioritize Teaching These Skills

Now that you have some examples of what communication skills are and why they are important, let's take some time to think about your child and their current skill level within this skill area.

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### ASSESS YOUR CHILD'S CURRENT SKILL LEVEL

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As you assess your child's current communication ability and steps moving towards your child's communication goals, it is important to think about what words or phrases would be the most beneficial for your child. In other words, what words or phrases are most socially significant? How often would your child have natural opportunities to practice these words or phrases? How would their environment and experiences change if they were able to use this language during every day routines?

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How would you describe your child's current communication skills? Take some time to think about your child's current skill level in this area, as well as what progress might look like for them. Using these questions as a guide, you may begin to identify some skills you would like to target with the help of your child's therapist/ team.

- How does my child respond when given an instruction?
- How consistently is my child able to use words and gestures to communicate with other people? Are there times of day this is more challenging for them?
- How does my child communicate when he wants or needs something?
- What does my child do to communicate that they like something?
- What does my child do to communicate they dislike something?
- How well is my child's communication understood by others?
- How could my child's communication improve in any of these areas? What would progress look like?
- How does my child ask for help or feedback?

While these questions may help you clarify some goal areas around communication, it is important to remember that all children learn to talk at different times and if you have concern about speech delays you may want to work with a speech-language pathologist, or SLP. There are also additional resources and toolkits in the resource section at the end of this document.

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Now that you have answered some questions about your child’s communication, you may be able to use a similar framework as you see below to make specific communication goals that are unique to your child.

Sample Communication Goals		
Current Skill	Next Step	Desired Outcome-Goal
When Rosie wants/needs something, she reaches for item and screams. Sometimes leading an adult to the area the item is in. Pushes them and cries.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reaching for item without screaming</li> <li>• Tolerate prompting for a point to request for item</li> <li>• Making single word approximations to request</li> </ul>	Rosie will request wants/needs by pointing and or giving single word responses (or approximation of word).
When Kash gets upset he talks very loudly or yells regardless of location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify activities that frustrate him.</li> <li>• Respond/ practice role play identifying more appropriate responses to situations.</li> <li>• Identify when he needs to take a break/ walk away and how to ask for that.</li> <li>• Identifying calming activity to “reset” and organize his ideas</li> </ul>	Kash will identify more appropriate responses to situations he identifies as unfair/wrong and respond by saying “I don’t agree, but everyone has their own opinion” or by asking, “is this optional?”



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## MODELING & EXPANDING LANGUAGE

Once you have identified a communication goal for your child, you can then determine what time of day would work best to work on the skill. What daily routines already exist where you can help by consistently prompting or modeling language around daily routines?

When thinking about modeling and expanding language, it is also important to remember to keep your language simple. Use the words that your child needs to use to gain access to his/her desired activity or item. For example, if your child is playing with cars and hasn't said car before, you can prompt for them to say car by modeling the language for them saying, "car" and taking a pause for them to respond. Depending on your child's current ability they may respond by reaching for the car or they may attempt to say the word. Either way you can expand their language by providing a model of one step above where they are currently. See flow chart below to see how this could be done.

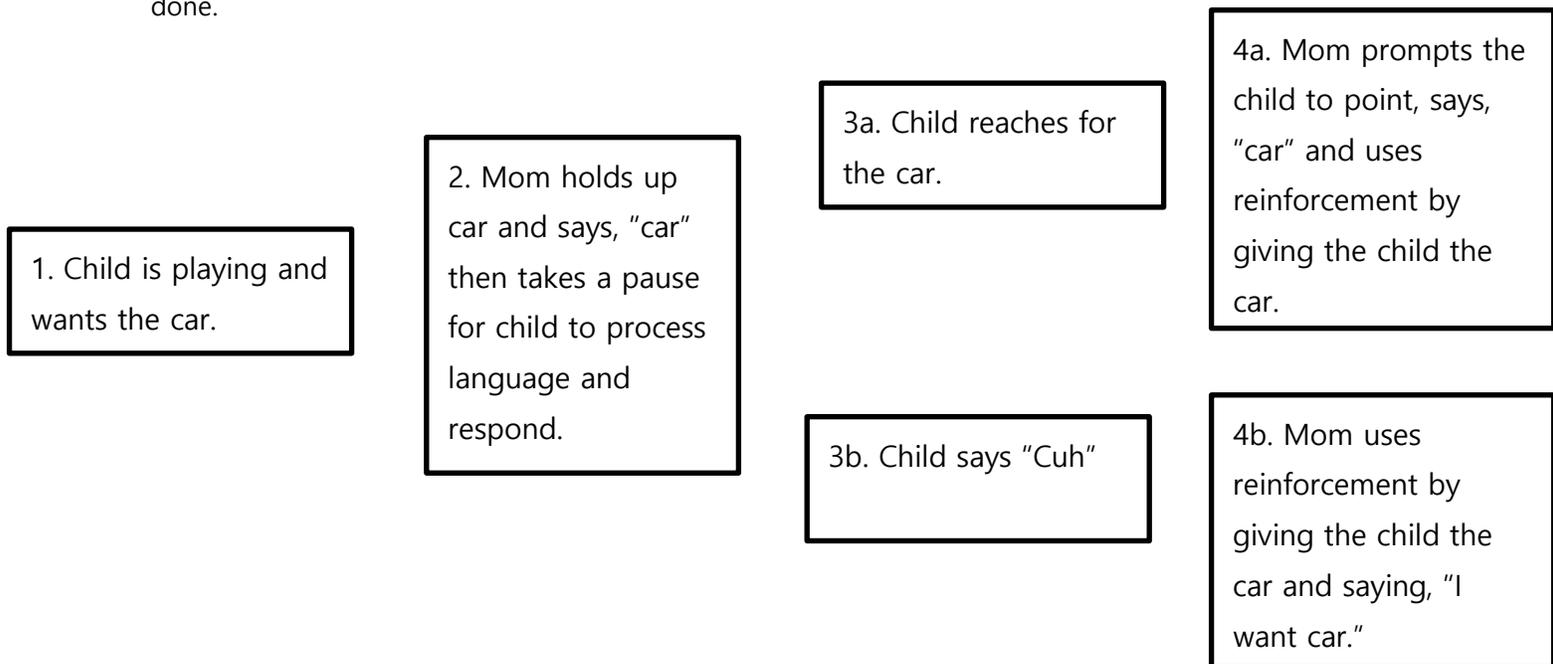
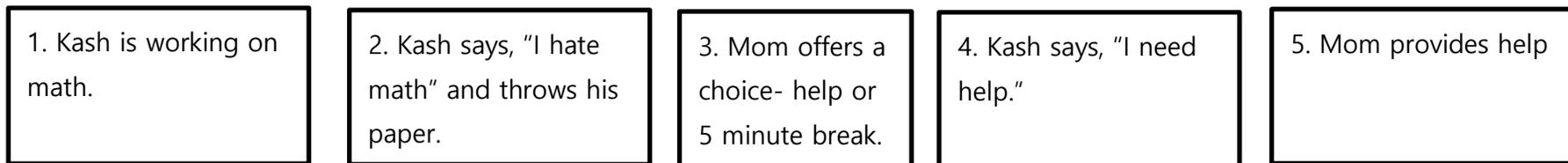


Figure 1. Flow chart of behavior pathway to show modeling and expanding language for those who are at their early stages of language.

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In figure 1, you can see how mom was able to provide reinforcement by giving access to the item that the child attempted to request, as well as modeling and expanding on what the child was able to do. Below is another flow chart example of modeling and expanding language for an individual with more complex language skills.



*Figure 2.* Flow chart example of modeling and expanding language for an individual with more complex language skills. In this example you can see how other areas of the big four, such as coping skills, are folded into areas of communication.

When reviewing the sample charts, remember these are only examples. The context of when the behavior happens, the intensity and severity of the behavior, what your child is trying to communicate with the behavior, the stressor triggering the behavior, and your child's current skill level and age will help you determine what is appropriate. What may be an appropriate example of a replacement skill for the behaviors shown in the chart above may not be an appropriate replacement skill for your child based on all the above factors. Again, ***this must be individualized to the child for it to be an appropriate and effective replacement skill.***

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## IMPORTANT TIPS TO REMEMBER

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- **These skills do not develop on their own.** Help your child develop these skills by intentionally creating opportunities for them to practice and gain these skills.
- **Remember to consider your child's current skill level, age, and a reasonable next step** for them to make progress towards reaching their goal. Autism Spectrum Disorder covers a broad spectrum of abilities; consider what supports, prompts, and strategies to use as you make progress towards helping them experience success to get desired outcomes.
- **Identify when to practice:** When introducing new communication skills, select times to practice when the child is calm. What times during your child's daily routine exist to practice the skills that will make a difference for them? For example, if your child is motivated by food and snack time is part of your daily routine, you could work on requesting for snacks during snack time.
- **Keep communication simple:** Simplify your language when giving new instructions to your child. When modeling new language, make sure to keep your language a step above ~~where~~ their current skill level ~~is~~.
- **Reinforce your child's communication attempts:** Make sure you are providing reinforcement to your child for using their language. Reinforcement should be provided for any new attempts your child is making. For example, if they are trying to request for something using one word but only say part of the word, reinforce any new attempts at communication.
- **Assess your progress:** Take some time to reflect what is working well, and any areas you may want to tweak to experience more success. Remember to praise the process and celebrate progress that comes with practice.
- Remember the definition that Alai-Rosales and colleagues (2018) give for communication skills: **Does my child safely, effectively, and respectfully communicate wants, needs, likes, and dislikes in ways that are understood by others and do not result in harm to self or others?** Remembering this definition can help as you continue to make progress with your child and expand on their communication goals as others are met.



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## RESOURCES

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**Assistive Technology for Communication Roadmap:** Toolkit from Autism Speaks to assist in understand the process of obtaining AAC and other assistive technology. <https://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/Augmentative%20Communications%20Road%20Map%20%281%29.pdf>

**Communicationmatrix.org:** The communication matrix is a free assessment families can use to help understand the communication status, progress, and unique needs of their child who is functioning at early stages of communication or using forms of communication other than speaking or writing.

**Early Identification of Speech, Language, and Hearing Disorders:** This is a resource posted on the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association's website that goes through how to identify the signs for early identification. <https://www.asha.org/public/early-identification-of-speech-language-and-hearing-disorders>

**Gallagher & Litton:** include 54 tips and tricks for implementing alternative and augmentative communication in the classroom. To see the entire resource from Independent Living Center WA click [here](#).

**Your Child's Communication Development:** Kindergarten through Fifth Grade: This is a resource posted on the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association's website that goes through typical language stages during development. The skills listed are those that should be met by the end of that grade; however, keep in mind children develop at their own rate. Click on what grade level to see goals for listening, speaking, reading, and writing. <https://www.asha.org/public/speech/development/communicationdevelopment/>

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## SAMPLE #1: COMMUNICATION SKILLS GOAL FORM

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**Child's Name:** Saul

**Date:** April 7, 2022

If your child has more complex communication, you may find Joseph's example helpful. Which can be found on the following page.

**Describe your child's current communication skill level:**

Saul repeats single words but primarily uses gestures and guiding to indicate his wants and needs. If he does not gain access within 60 seconds to a desired item he may scream. If screaming doesn't result in access to desired item he often will pinch or hit the person closest to him.

**What would progress look like? Write your goal(s) for your child here:**

Saul will use his communication app on iPad to communicate his wants and needs. He will learn to wait up to 5 minutes to access requested items without screaming or showing aggression towards himself or others. Aggression currently includes pinching or hitting another person. At times Saul may also pinch himself if aggression towards others does not result in access to preferred items.

**When will I practice this skill with my child? What routines/ times of day work best?**

Start by using the iPad to make requests during snack time and play time at home. Then expand to using it any time Saul requests items, such as food or preferred play items.

**How will I help teach this skill to my child? This is what I will do to support my child to learn this skill.**

Have a toy in sight but out of reach to create opportunity for communication. Present snack choices using pictures or actual food/ drink. Have iPad charged, app open, and nearby. When Saul reaches towards the toy or snack or guides my hand, I can prompt Saul to use the iPad to point to the picture of the desired item and immediately provide the item to him with verbal praise. Make sure to talk to everyone in the home so that we are all consistent in our responses to prompt and honor next level communication responses.



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## SAMPLE #2: COMMUNICATION SKILLS GOAL FORM

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**Child's Name:** Joseph

**Date:** April 7, 2022

**Describe your child's current communication skill level:**

Joseph has a vast vocabulary and is able to communicate his wants; however, it is a challenge when he is put in a position where he thinks something is unfair or someone is not following the rules. He can get loud when this happens and sometimes uses swear words. We would like to see him able to find better ways to communicate or manage his frustration so it is more socially appropriate.

**What would progress look like? Write your goal(s) for your child here:**

When Joseph is upset by someone being "unfair," he will seek out an adult he can share his frustration with. He will do this by asking for a break when he starts to show signs of agitation (fidgeting, raising his voice).

**When will I practice this skill with my child? What routines/ times of day work best?**

We will do this in the afternoons when he doesn't have additional homework.

**How will I help teach this skill to my child? This is what I will do to support my child to learn this skill.**

We will practice this skill by doing some role playing and thinking of scenarios that happen at school and could happen at potential work places. We will make a list of trusted adults in scenarios where it would be appropriate to reach out to them and practice how to approach the trusted adult, and when it is a good time to ask for a break to reset from being frustrated by another person "breaking a rule."



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## COMMUNICATION SKILLS GOAL FORM

Child's Name:

Date:

Describe your child's current communication skill level:

What would progress look like? Write your goal(s) for your child here:

When will I practice this skill with my child? What routines/ times of day work best?

How will I help teach this skill to my child? This is what I will do to support my child to learn this skill.



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