

# Thinking Functionally

(within age-expected bounds)

## Early Child Outcomes are functional.

Thinking about young children’s outcomes from a functional framework requires a shift from a more traditional viewpoint of child development.

## Characteristics of functional outcomes...

- ◆ Include things which are meaningful to the child in the context of everyday living
- ◆ Are an integrated series of behaviors or skills that allow the child to achieve outcomes
- ◆ Emphasize how the child is able to integrate (behaviors) across developmental domains to carry out complex meaningful behaviors

Functional outcomes are NOT...

- 1) A single behavior
- 2) The sum of a series of discrete behaviors
- 3) Based on developmental domains (like many assessments)
- 4) Trying to separate child development into discrete areas (e.g., communication, gross motor, cognitive, etc.)

<b>Thinking Functionally (within age-expected bounds)</b>	
<i>Not just...</i>	<i>But does he/she...</i>
Know how to make eye contact, smile, and give a hug →	Initiate affection toward caregivers and respond to others with affection?
Know how to imitate a gesture when prompted by others →	Watch what a peer says or does and incorporate it into his/her own play?
Use finger in pointing motion →	Point to indicate needs or wants?
Show a skill in a specific situation →	Use a skill in actions across settings and situations to accomplish something meaningful to the child?
<b>Items to Consider When Measuring Functional Outcomes</b>	
1. What does the child typically do?	
2. What is the child’s actual performance across settings and situations?	
3. How does the child use his/her skills to accomplish tasks?	
<i>It is <b>not</b> assessing the child’s capacity to function under ideal circumstances</i>	

## **What is a FUNCTIONAL outcome?**

### **First – what’s an outcome?**

- Outcomes are the benefits that children and families experience as a result of early intervention/early childhood special education services.
- The three child outcomes, as measured for accountability purposes, are different than IFSP or IEP outcomes in that
  - The three child outcomes reflect global functioning in three broad areas of development (social-emotional, knowledge and skills, getting needs met)
  - IFSP or IEP outcomes are specific to an individual child, based on his or her individual needs.
- Each outcome is a snapshot of:
  - The whole child
  - Status of the child’s current functioning
  - Functioning across settings and situations

### **But what makes it FUNCTIONAL?**

Functional outcomes:

- Refer to things that are meaningful to the child in the context of everyday living
- Refer to an integrated series of behaviors or skills that allows the child to achieve the important everyday goals

### **How do I assess functional outcomes?**

Emphasize ‘meaning’ – ask:

- Can the child carry out meaningful behaviors in a meaningful context?  
*NOT*
- Can the child perform discrete behaviors such as knowing 10 words, smiling at mom, stacking 3 blocks, pincer grasp, walking backward?

Observe a child in natural settings to learn:

- What does the child usually do?
- What is his actual performance across settings and situations?
- How does the child use his/her skills to accomplish tasks?

The assessment of functioning is NOT about:

- the child’s capacity to function under unusual or ideal circumstances, skill by skill, domain by domain
- the child’s performance in a structured testing situation, in one standardized way

### **Why isn’t assessing the child’s ability to perform discrete behaviors enough?**

Discrete behaviors (e.g., those described by some items on assessment instruments) may or may not be important to the child's functioning on the outcome.

- Individually, they are not especially informative
- Summed, they may or may not be useful, depending on the functionality of the behaviors/items.

Think about isolated behaviors and what observing them tells you about the child. For example, suppose an assessment instrument asks you to observe whether or not a child can point:

- If you know that a child can point, do you know that the child can communicate her wants and needs?
- If you know that a child can't point, do you know that the she can't communicate his wants and needs?
- How does knowing about pointing help you understand how the child takes action to meet needs?

### **What about domains?**

- Functionality is not domains-based; children function across developmental domains
- Functionality can involve multiple domains and can cross domains
- Functional outcomes refer to behaviors that integrate skills across domains

### **What does functionality have to do with using the Child Outcomes Summary Form (COSF)?**

Ratings on the seven-point scale for each outcome are a snapshot of:

- The whole child
- Status of the child's current functioning
- Functioning across settings and situations

Ratings are based on the child's functioning:

- What the child does across settings and situations
- Compared with what is expected given the child's age

### **Discussion questions**

Look at the list of skills below. Which are examples of isolated skills? Which are examples of functional skills?<sup>1</sup>

- a. Knows how to imitate a gesture when prompted by others
- b. Uses finger in pointing motion
- c. Uses 2-word utterances
- d. Watches what a peer says or does and incorporates it into his/her own play
- e. Points to indicate needs or wants
- f. Engages in back and forth verbal exchanges with caregivers using 2-word utterances

Was this handout useful? Please share comments, suggestions, or questions with us at [staff@the-eco-center.org](mailto:staff@the-eco-center.org).

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<sup>1</sup> a=isolated, b=isolated, c=isolated, d=functional, e=functional, f=functional