

# Moving from Rote to Functional Language

Children with autism often start with strong rote language skills (such as labeling or repeating), but to support communication, we need to build functional language—language that helps them get their needs met, interact, and share. Here are practical steps to practice requests (manding):

- Start with motivating items (snacks, toys, favorite objects).
- When your child reaches for an item, model the request verbally: e.g., 'I want car' or 'Give me juice'.
- Prompt your child to imitate the phrase. Reward immediately by giving the item.
- Keep phrases short at first (e.g., 'car', 'juice'), then expand to 'I want car'.
- Use natural opportunities throughout the day (meal time, play, outside).
- Reinforce every attempt at communication, even if imperfect (e.g., 'ju' for 'juice').
- Gradually fade prompts so your child initiates requests independently.

**Example:** If your child reaches for a toy car, you say, 'I want car.' Encourage your child to repeat. When they try, hand over the car immediately. This teaches that communication is powerful and gets results.