

COMMUNICATING WANTS AND NEEDS

What is this developmental skill?

Communicating wants and needs is the ability to let others know what they need, want, prefer, or dislike. It begins with crying, gestures, eye contact, and pointing, then develops into words, phrases, and complete sentences. As children mature, they learn to ask for help, express preferences, and communicate physical and emotional needs.

This skill teaches children that communication is an effective way to influence their environment and that trusted adults will respond.

How does this normally develop?

Children learn this skill through consistent, responsive caregiving. When caregivers notice and respond to a baby's cries, gestures, or early words, children discover that their communication has meaning. As vocabulary grows, caregivers encourage children to use words instead of guessing their needs or responding only to distress. Thousands of these everyday interactions build both language and confidence.

How can neglect interfere?

Neglect disrupts one of the earliest developmental lessons—that communication matters.

When caregivers are emotionally unavailable or inconsistent, children may learn that asking for help changes nothing. Some stop expressing their needs because they expect to be ignored. Others become increasingly demanding because they have learned that only intense behavior gets attention.

What might this look like?

A child may:

- Rarely ask for help, even when struggling.
- Cry, yell, or become aggressive instead of using words.
- Have difficulty identifying what they need.
- Insist on doing everything independently.
- Make repeated or urgent demands because they expect to be overlooked.

These behaviors are often adaptations to inconsistent caregiving rather than intentional misbehavior.

Parenting Implications

Caregivers can strengthen this skill by:

- Responding consistently to appropriate requests.
- Modeling simple language for asking for help.
- Giving children time to express themselves.
- Acknowledging both verbal and nonverbal communication.
- Praising communication rather than only compliance.

The goal is to help children learn that expressing their needs is safe and worthwhile.

From Understanding to Attunement

When a child struggles to communicate wants and needs, ask yourself: *"Has this child learned that adults will respond when they ask for help?"* Instead of seeing silence as independence or demanding behavior as manipulation, recognize that both may reflect earlier experiences. Every warm, consistent response teaches a new lesson: *"My needs matter, and trusted adults will help me meet them."*

