

Understanding Functional Skills: Background for the COS Process

August 16, 2022

For more information, visit: <https://ectacenter.org/eco/pages/cos-functional.asp>

This document helps teams think about measuring a child's use and integration of functional skills to participate in their everyday routines. This resource will help teams further their understanding of the following questions:

- What makes a skill functional?
- How does context help align functional skills with each of the three outcomes?
- How do teams assess functional skills?

The goal of early intervention and early childhood special education is to enable young children with disabilities to be active and successful participants during their early childhood years and in the future. **Child outcomes** are the benefits that children and families experience as a result of early intervention or early childhood special education services. The three child outcomes selected for federal reporting reflect a child's global functioning in three broad areas of development:

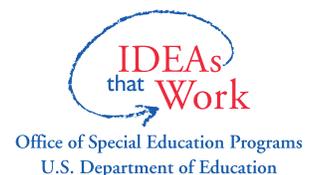
- Outcome 1: Positive Social-Emotional Skills (including social relationships)
- Outcome 2: Acquisition and Use of Knowledge and Skills
- Outcome 3: Use of Appropriate Behaviors to Meet Needs

To measure a child's functioning and progress toward these outcomes, teams must identify how children use and integrate their functional skills to participate in their everyday routines, activities, and interactions. Teams using the **Child Outcomes Summary (COS) Process** 7-point rating scale for outcomes measurement aim for a snapshot of the whole child. This includes where the child's functioning is at in relation to age expectations, and how the child is functioning across settings and situations.



KEY TAKEAWAY: Child outcomes measurement and the COS Process are based on the functional skills children demonstrate in the context of their routines, activities, and interactions.

The contents of this document were developed under a cooperative agreement, #H326P170001, and a grant, #H373Z190002, from the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education. However, the content does not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. ECTA Center Project Officer: Julia Martin Eile DaSy Center Project Officers: Meredith Miceli and Amy Bae



What makes a skill functional?

Each of the three child outcomes encompasses an array of functional skills involved in a child's participation in day-to-day routines. *Functional skills* are those skills a young child uses to complete tasks and participate in everyday life. To understand a child's level of functioning, the team must know the child's intent and purpose when using a skill. Functionality is not inherent to a skill itself, but can be found in a child's meaningful use of that skill.

For example, the ability to stand on one foot is an isolated, discrete skill. Determining function is a process of asking *why*—Why is the child standing on one foot? Is it to put on a pair of pants, to play hopscotch with friends, or so that a caregiver can dry the other foot off after bath time?

K–12 educators sometimes use *functional skills* as a term to refer to those skills a student needs to live independently (for example, riding the bus). Functional skills are contrasted with academic skills, which are those skills taught in the general education curriculum. However, in early childhood and for the purposes of this document and for thinking about the outcomes in the COS process, functional skills are defined more broadly, and include the skills a child demonstrates in the context of their everyday life. In this view, functional skills include self-help skills, skills used when interacting with others, and even academic skills (for example, counting out carrot sticks for snack time—number concepts are functional when their use is meaningful and in context).



Example: Isolated, Discrete Skills and Possible Functional Uses

Isolated, discrete skill	Functional use of skill
Reaches around a barrier to retrieve a toy.	When playing with the ball, Ingo goes behind the couch to retrieve it when it rolls under the couch so that he can continue playing.
Repeat a 3-digit sequence in order	During art activities, Alira regularly follows directions to collect three materials for an activity, for example, “Go get a paint brush, smock, and paper,” or “Go get the Play-Doh, cookie cutters, and rolling pin”.
Extend index finger in a pointing direction independent of other fingers and thumb	When Esteban wants a cookie, he looks up at the top of the fridge where the cookie jar sits and he points at the jar, says “me cookie”, and looks at his mom.



KEY TAKEAWAY: Functional skills are those a child integrates to complete tasks and participate in everyday life. Functional skills have intent and purpose in a context meaningful to the child.

How does context help align functional skills with each of the three outcomes?

Once teams know the function and context of a skill, they can align it with a specific outcome. The process of aligning skills to outcomes helps the team know whether they have enough information about a child’s functioning to measure outcomes. For example, skills can be aligned with outcomes, as well as skills bundles that are encompassed within each outcome.

Detailed information about how a child uses skills in the context of everyday routines helps teams determine the functional purpose of the skill, and the outcome to which that functional skill aligns. When information about the child’s functioning lacks detail about the context or function of a skill, the team must gather more information. Further observation and interviews with caregivers can provide the detail needed to understand the function of a skill and align it with an outcome.

See also: [Aligning A Child's Functional Skills with the Breadth of the Three Child Outcomes](#)

Example: What is the Function?

Following directions — What is the function?

Skill function and context	Outcome	Skill bundle
Following directions about the classroom schedule and transitioning from one activity to another	1	Following Social Norms and Adapting to Change in Routines
Following directions related to academic content (for example, “Look at the pictures and tell me, who did Bobby take to school in the story?”)	2	Understanding Pre-Academics and Literacy
Following directions to hold hands when crossing the street	3	Showing Safety Awareness

Playing — What is the function?

Skill function and context	Outcome	Skill bundle
Playing with siblings and other children	1	Interacting with Peers
Playing by pretending to get a toy doll ready for bed and rocking it to sleep	2	Engaging in Purposeful Play
Playing by independently squatting down to pick up the ball and then standing back up before putting it in the clothes basket	3	Moving Around and Manipulating Things to Meet Needs

Manipulating objects — What is the function?

Skill function and context	Outcome	Skill Bundle
Manipulating objects to engage in a back-and-forth game with another child	1	Interacting with Peers
Manipulating objects to solve a problem, through trial and error	2	Engaging in Purposeful Play
Manipulating objects to meet needs, such as using a fork to stab and eat food	3	Eating and Drinking with Increasing Independence



KEY TAKEAWAY: Teams need detailed information about how the child uses the skills in everyday routines before they can determine the functional purpose and use of the skill and align it with the relevant child outcome.

How do teams assess functional skills?

Authentic assessment methods help teams gather information about a child's functioning across settings and situations. These methods include direct observation and interviews with those who spend time with the child as described in the [DEC Recommended Practices](#).

Teams can ask questions to determine the function of skills to understand skills not adequately described, or learn about a child's everyday functioning in meaningful routines and activities, for example:

- What does the child usually do?
- How does the child perform in different settings and situations?
- How does the child use skills to accomplish tasks?

Some formal assessment tools are not useful for understanding a child's functioning. These tools tend to provide information about isolated, discrete skills that are demonstrated in a testing environment, with no apparent function. For example, a test item assesses if a child can point. Pointing is an isolated, discrete skill. To understand a child's functioning, the team will need to know how the child uses pointing, such as to communicate wants and needs (Outcome 3) or to activate a toy (Outcome 2).

Formal assessment tools help establish a child's eligibility for early intervention or early childhood special education services. However, when assessment items are administered in a structured testing situation without clear purpose within meaningful contexts, they provide minimal information about a child's functional use of skills in everyday life. Assessment outside of the child's natural context does not provide the team information on how the child uses a skill in a typical daily routine, and is not sufficient for determining if the skill is functional for the child.

Example: Assessing Functional Skills

Discrete or vaguely described skill	Questions about skill function	Possible functional skills
Counts one to 10 (discrete skills)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the function? • For what purpose is the child using this skill? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • make sure there are enough cookies (Outcome 3) • demonstrate rote counting (Outcome 2) • participate in a game of hide and seek (Outcome 1)
Biting (discrete skill)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the function? • For what purpose is the child using this skill? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • bite a cookie to eat it (Outcome 3) • pretend imitating dinosaur actions while playing (Outcome 2) • let another child know not to take their toy (Outcome 1)
Persists (vague)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the function? • When, where, and how is the child showing persistence for what purpose? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • complete a dressing task (Outcome 3) • figure things out, such as how to activate a toy (Outcome 2) • maintain interaction with a caregiver (Outcome 1)
Enjoys playful games (vague)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the function? • How does the child do this? • In what context(s)? • For what purpose? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • play with sidewalk chalk and coloring pictures (Outcome 2) • smile and looking at her mom when they play face-to-face back-and-forth noisemaking games (Outcome 1)
Understands directions (vague)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the function? • What kinds of directions? • In what context(s)? • For what purpose? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • follow complex directions to collect materials needed for an activity, for example, “Go get the maracas, bells, and triangles for our next song” (Outcome 2) • follow directions, for example, “Get your coat and put it on” as part of the going home routine (Outcome 1)



KEY TAKEAWAY: Authentic assessment methods, such as observation and interviews with caregivers, provide teams with information about a child’s functional use of skills.

Child Outcomes Summary Process Resources

For further information and practice opportunities, refer to the following resources:

- [Aligning A Child's Functional Skills with the Breadth of the Three Child Outcomes](#) — This resource supports high-quality Child Outcomes Summary (COS) ratings by helping teams connect their observations of children's functional skills and behaviors with the three child outcomes. Effectively aligning functional skills and outcomes will help Part C early intervention and Part B, Section 619 preschool special education program teams improve their outcome measurement.
- [Child Outcomes – Practice Scenarios \(COS-PS\)](#) — The COS-PS is a collection of scenarios of children, ages 6 months to 5 years, that allow you to practice aligning information about each child with the three child outcomes and anchoring the information by age.
- [Instrument Crosswalks](#) — *Crosswalks* cross-reference the functional skills assessed by various published instruments with the three child outcomes required by OSEP for Part C and Part B, Section 619 programs to assess the degree to which these instruments measure the required outcomes.
- [Topical COS Professional Development Activities](#) — These activities focus on aspects of the COS Process providers frequently need additional training and support (*see Assessing Functional Skills*).
- [Child Outcomes Summary \(COS\) Process Quick Reference Guide](#)
- [Developing High-Quality, Functional IFSP Outcomes and IEP Goals Training Package](#) — This training package was developed collaboratively with staff from the ECTA Center and the Western Regional Resource Center (WRRRC) in response to the need expressed from state and local providers to have specific information and resources about developing Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) outcomes and Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals.