Functional Skills and Behaviors

What makes a skill or behavior *functional*?
Functional skills and behaviors refer to:
- Things that are meaningful to the child in the context of everyday living; and
- An integrated series of behaviors or skills that allow the child to participate in activities and achieve important everyday goals.

How is functionality assessed?
Emphasize 'meaning' – ask:
- Can the child carry out meaningful behaviors in a meaningful context? *NOT*
- Can the child perform discrete behaviors (e.g., those described by some items on assessment instruments), 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/her 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; or
- the child's performance in a structured testing situation, in one standardized way.

Why isn't assessing the child's ability to perform discrete skills enough?
Discrete behaviors may or may not be important to the child's functioning. Individually, they are not especially informative. Summed, they may or may not be useful, depending on their functionality.

Think about discrete 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 his/her wants and needs?
- If you know that a child can't point, do you know that he/she can't communicate his/her wants and needs?
- How does knowing whether or not the child can point help you understand how he/she takes action to meet his/her needs (Outcome 3)?

How does functionality relate to development domains?
- Functionality is not domains-based.
- Children function by integrating skills and behaviors *across* developmental domains.

What does functionality have to do with the Child Outcomes Summary (COS) process?
Using the COS 7-point rating scale involves examining the child's functioning to get a snapshot of:
- The whole child;
- Where the child's functioning falls in relation to age-expectations; and
- How the child is functioning across settings and situations.