Rating Guidelines

STEP 1

Please review all of the **communication methods** on the cover page and check off the one(s) used by the child you are rating.

STEP 2

Please review the five descriptions (i.e., **Levels V**, **IV**, **III**, **II**, & **I**) and the distinctions between levels.

- The social communication of this child/youth should match the full description for the level. If their abilities do not quite match the whole description, they should be rated in the level that best reflects current functioning.

STEP 3

Typical Performance or Typical Function Level: Thinking about the **last month**, what level looks most like this child/youth on **most days**? This represents the communication you have observed them doing most consistently (throughout this past month).

Typical Level (circle one):

Level V	Level IV	Level III	Level II	Level I

STEP 4

Best Capacity or Best Function Level: Still thinking about the **last month**, what level looks most like this child/youth when they were at their **very best**? This represents the best communication you have observed them doing (even if it has been only one time this past month).

Best Level (circle one):

Level V	Level IV	Level III	Level II	Level I

STEP 5

Child/youth (ID, initials, or name)	
Birth date (dd-mmm-yyyy)	
Rating date (dd-mmm-yyyy)	
Rater (parent, professional, other, specify)	
Rating environments (home, school, clinic)	
Number of months/years known child/youth	

ACSF

(For Children/Youth Of All Ages)

Autism Classification System of Functioning: Social Communication

Briano Di Rezze, Peter Rosenbaum, Lonnie Zwaigenbaum, Mary Jo Cooley Hidecker, Paul Stratford, Mary Law, and Martha Cousins
Version 2021

This classification system is for children/youth, of all ages, who have a diagnosis of autism.

Social Communication refers to the ABILITY to communicate – with or without words – for the PURPOSE of interacting with others.

Thinking about the last month, please review all possible communication methods – verbal and non-verbal – as listed below that this child/youth may have used to let you know what they were thinking. Check all that apply.

There are lots of ways to communicate, as listed below.

- ☐ Facial expressions or emotional responses (e.g., smiling when happy, crying when sad, or screaming when upset)
- ☐ Body movements or gestures (e.g., pointing, waving, touching)
- ☐ Sign language (even if it is not perfect)
- ☐ Eye contact & use of eye gaze (to direct your attention)
- ☐ Augmentative & Alternative Communication (AAC) technology, equipment or tools (e.g., PECS, iPad, photo albums, scrapbooks, speech generating devices)
- ☐ Vocalizations or sounds (e.g., babbling, cooing, mmm or ah sounds)
- ☐ Spoken words or speech (regardless of pronunciation)

Next, read through the **five levels** and **distinctions** to choose the description that looks most like this child/youth. Please record your ratings on the back page of this pamphlet. For more information, review the accompanying ACSF User Guide booklet.

In the Past Month …

Level V — … Their communication MAY have looked like this:

Making few if any attempts to **react** to communication: from simple words, physical action requests for engagement, music, songs, or everyday activities.

For the most part the child/youth is **solitary** and may gesture or vocalize without directing these efforts to anyone, while exploring, playing, or interacting with favourite toys, games, or objects. Familiar people may be able to use the situation to understand the child's/youth's **own purpose** for communication.

Level IV — … Their communication HAS looked like this:

Reacting to and may be attempting to **respond** to communication from familiar people (e.g., from, smiling when happy, crying when sad, screaming when upset, to following simple instructions, or deferring to a parent under unfamiliar situations), but not responding to people they don't know.

Making few if any attempts to **initiate** communication for their **own needs**. The needs expressed may be subtle, indirect, and only understood by familiar people. The purpose of their communication is focused on their own needs (e.g., thirst, hunger, toileting).

Level III — … Their communication HAS looked like this:

Responding to communication from familiar people when asked simple and routine questions about their **own needs**. Making few if any attempts to **react** or **respond** to communication, such as greetings and questions, from **less familiar people** (i.e., people not seen regularly by the child/youth).

Attempting to **initiate** with **familiar people**, using simple or practiced routine gestures, sounds, or words (e.g., pointing, touching, taking your hand to an object they want to reach). The purpose of these attempts is for both their **own needs** (e.g., food, drink) and also for **social purposes** relating to their **own interests and activities** (e.g., favourite toy/object, friends, movies, video games).

Level II — … Their communication HAS looked like this:

Responding to, **initiating**, and attempting to **maintain** communication with **familiar people** for **social purposes** focused mainly on their **own needs**, **interests and activities**. May also **respond** when asked simple questions about their **own interests/activities** by **less familiar people** (i.e., people they do not see regularly).

M**aintaining** communication may include back-and-forth exchanges to **simple** questions from **familiar people about things they know**, with some prompting or in familiar settings/environments; they may have difficulty when the other person cannot understand them or tries to change the topic/activity.

Level I — … Their communication HAS looked like this:

Responding to, **initiating**, and also **maintaining** communication for **social purposes** about more than just their **own needs**, **interests and activities**. May also **respond** with **less familiar people** about their own their own needs, interests, and activities.

This includes **maintaining** communication, through back-and-forth exchanges, to simple questions about **less familiar topics or activities**; and may try to show interest in questions or activities introduced **by others**. (e.g., An adult in a recreational setting asks if they want to participate in an activity, and the child/youth responds with gesture, sound or words. More specific questions are asked by the adult and the child/youth is able to communicate their thoughts).

Distinctions …

… Between Levels V and IV

A child/youth in **Level V** at best **reacts** to communication from familiar people; & the PURPOSE of their communication may only be understood by people who see the child/youth regularly.

WHEREAS a child/youth in **Level IV** may be attempting to **respond** or **initiate** with familiar people when the communication is about their own **needs**.

… Between Levels IV and III

A child/youth in **Level IV** is both **reacting** and **responding** to communication from familiar people, and are making few if any attempts to **initiate** communication; & the purpose of their communication is to have their **needs** met and/or **wants** recognized.

WHEREAS a child/youth in **Level III** may be attempting to **initiate** with familiar people when the communication is about their own **needs**, and they may also be attempting to **initiate** for social purposes about their own **interests**.

… Between Levels III and II

A child/youth in **Level III** is **responding** and attempting to **initiate** for both their own **needs** and **interests** through routine and practiced methods, but without being able to maintain communication through back-and-forth exchanges.

WHEREAS a child/youth in **Level II** is **initiating** and **responding** to most people for social purposes, and may be attempting to **maintain** communication through back-and-forth exchanges with familiar people when the topic is about their own **interests** and/or **activities**.

…Between Levels II and I

A child/youth in **Level II** is **initiating** and attempting to **maintain** communication through back-and-forth exchanges for social purposes with familiar people; & may also attempt to **respond** when asked simple or routine questions by less familiar people.

WHEREAS a child/youth in **Level I** is initiating, responding, and maintaining communication about more than their **own interests** or **activities**; & may also be attempting to **maintain** communication or **adapt** to changes in topic/activity, through effective strategies such as practiced displays of interest.

ACSF
(For Children/Youth Of All Ages)

User Guide

Autism Classification System of Functioning:
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Version 2021

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WHAT ARE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEMS AND WHY DO WE NEED THEM?

WHY CLASSIFY EVERYDAY FUNCTIONING?

Classification systems of functioning in the field of child and youth development have been used since the late 1990s. People have asked several questions about them:

    (1) Why do we need them?
    (2) How do they work?
    (3) How do they help us?

The ACSF is part of a growing number of tools that describe levels of everyday functioning in a way that is consistent (reliable) and accurate (valid). For ACSF, we are interested in only the social communication functioning of children and young people with autism. Our work is based on the experience with creating classification systems in cerebral palsy, so we can answer these questions about the ACSF as follows.

(1) Why do we need these systems?

Classification systems of functioning are designed to describe the range of abilities of people with that condition. With a classification, we can have a more precise picture of the current abilities of each child or youth. This is preferable to lumping everyone with a diagnosis together, and assuming that they are all similar. Classification systems look at a specific aspect of functioning (for the ACSF – it is social communication). This way of doing things recognizes that individuals have strengths and needs in different areas.

(2) How do they work?

The classifications are developed with the input and experience of parents and professionals who understand the condition (in this case ASD). The system is meant to include everyone with that condition. The categories are distinct from one another. It is important to know that the system is used consistently, by people who know the child/youth – rating them the same way under the same circumstances. The levels also have to show differences between the levels that people find meaningful.

(3) How do they help us?

Classifications describe importantly distinct levels of functioning. This helps with planning and treatment specific to each level of functioning. They may also help us predict future levels of functioning, and what factors influence a level.

Finally, these systems allow professionals to answer parents when they ask: "How is my child functioning? What can we expect their social communication ability to be as they develop?"

WHY DID WE DEVELOP THE ACSF?

Professionals and parents of children and youth with autism know that each child is unique in what they can do and in their behavioural or medical issues. For example, all children with autism have some challenges with social communication. Some also may struggle with sensory issues, repetitive behaviours, a lack of flexibility and other issues. Each of these issues may impact their ability to function in everyday life. For the purpose of classifying with **this system**, we want people to focus only on the **social communication** abilities of their child/youth.

Most people are familiar with the terms 'mild', 'moderate' or 'severe', often used to describe persons with autism. Unfortunately there is no common understanding of what these words mean. We have addressed this challenge by creating a common language to describe and talk about social communication in autism. Our way focuses on what children/youth **can do when it comes to social communication**. We know this because our research team surveyed parents and professionals. They told us that 'social communication' was the most significant issue in ASD (See *reference at the bottom of this page). This **Autism Classification System of Functioning (ACSF)** describes FIVE levels of social communication function in everyday life.

The **ACSF** will **not replace** any diagnostic tools or assessments. It is not a test or checklist. What it **does do** is provide a simple and consistent way to talk about the social communication abilities of children/youth (what they can do).

We are interested in child/youth social communication functioning in two situations:

(1) What they **usually do** on most days (Typical Performance or Typical Function Level)
(2) When they are performing **at their best** (Best Capacity or Best Function Level)

This information can then be shared easily between parents and professionals (educators, clinicians). It will help people who work closely with the child in different environments to understand how they are doing and what might be impacting on their observed behaviour.

*Di Rezze B, Rosenbaum P, Zwaigenbaum L. What Attributes Determine Severity of Function in Autism? A Web-based Survey of Stakeholders. Focus on Autism & Other Developmental Disabilities Volume 27 Issue 1 March 2012 pp. 37-39.

ACSF TOOL: DEFINITIONS OF KEY WORDS AND CONCEPTS

SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

Social Communication is the ABILITY to communicate (with or without words) for the PURPOSE of interacting with others. A child/youth who has more spoken language than others is not necessarily more able to interact socially. For each of the FIVE levels of the ACSF, people will be asked to make judgments about:

(1) The **purpose** for which the child/youth is communicating
(2) **How** the child/youth is **communicating** (Ability – Skills and Strategies)

(1) PURPOSE OF COMMUNICATION

In the ACSF, the terms 'needs' and 'social purposes' are frequently used when talking about the reasons or the purposes for which children/youth communicate.

- **COMMUNICATE FOR THE PURPOSE OF HAVING NEEDS MET:** the reason for communicating is only to get something that the child wants, such as an object like a favourite toy (e.g., a child/youth might request a toy or object from someone).

- **COMMUNICATE FOR SOCIAL PURPOSES:** the reason for communicating is to start or sustain an interaction with someone else (e.g., a child/youth may say 'hi' or wave to greet a peer or adult; or comment or gesture to draw someone's attention to something they are excited to see; or approach others to interact about a topic).

(2) HOW THE CHILD IS COMMUNICATING (Abilities - Skills and strategies)

Children/youth have different levels of ability in how they communicate. For example, some might request using words, while others will take a person's hand to get something (such as a toy or food) or placing a box of crayons in a person's hand to get help to open the box, etc.

- Some young people with ASD may have communication strategies that are only understood by their primary caregiver or a familiar therapist/teacher; others may not yet communicate in a way that is understood even by their caregivers.

- Some young people with ASD can be seen using effective communication, sustaining an interaction and being understood by a wide range of people (not just their primary caregiver).

POSSIBLE METHODS OF COMMUNICATING

When thinking about 'social communication' please consider both spoken and non-verbal ways that your child/youth uses to let you know what they are thinking or want. These ways can appear at any level of the ACSF, and could include:

☐ **Facial expressions or emotional responses,** such as smiling when happy, crying when sad, or screaming when upset.

☐ **Body movements or gestures,** such as pointing, waving or touching, and moving or shifting their body towards someone or a group.

☐ **Sign language (even if it is not perfect),** to express what they want. The signs only need to be understandable, not perfect!

☐ **Eye contact and use of eye gaze (to direct your attention),** such as looking towards others or an object of interest and then looking back and forth between object and social partner.

☐ **Augmentative & Alternative Communication (ACC) technology, equipment, or tools (e.g., PECS®, iPad®, photo albums, scrapbooks, speech generating devices),** to show that they want to participate in the activity with others by pointing to a picture or asking for something with a device.

☐ **Vocalizations or sounds,** such as babbling, cooing, or making "mmm or "ah" sounds to indicate awareness of your presence.

☐ **Spoken words or speech (regardless of pronunciation),** to express verbally that they want. The words or speech only need to be understandable, not perfect!

(1) TYPICAL PERFORMANCE OR TYPICAL FUNCTION LEVEL

The Typical Performance, or Typical Function, Level is what the social communication of the child/youth looks like on an average day or on most days, or most of the time.

(2) BEST CAPACITY OR BEST FUNCTION LEVEL

The Best Capacity, or Best Function, Level reflects what the social communication of the child/youth looks like when they are at their best, and communicating most effectively. This may be observed infrequently, even if only at one time.

Why do you need to choose BOTH Typical AND Best ratings?

Users are asked to think about how the social communication of their child/youth can vary. There are often differences between Typical Performance/Function Level and Best Capacity/Function Level. We ask people to choose **ONE** social communication level for **EACH** (Typical and Best situations).

Knowing when a child/youth is most successful (Best Capacity/Function Level) and what they are like most of the time (Typical Performance/Function Level) may provide valuable insight about how to improve social communication functioning across all situations. This may be useful in education and intervention planning.

This is helpful because it reminds people to think about what might be different between these two social communication levels. For example, what is happening, when, where and with whom? Are there things that help social communication and things that may make it more difficult? For example, things in the environment that could impact a child/youth's social communication may include:

- The **space** where the social communication is taking place (examples - physical or sensory qualities of the space)
- The **activity** that may be taking place (examples - physical, cognitive or social demands of the activity)
- Access to **personal communication devices (**example – AAC technology, iPad®)
- The **people** within the environment (examples - relationships and attitudes, familiar or unfamiliar)

What the ACSF Tool CAN DO …

- Can **describe** what **social communication abilities** look like for children/youth of all ages with ASD, tested up to the age of 16 years old[1,2]
- Can **classify** children/youth by their **social communication abilities**
- Can **distinguish** between **two aspects of ability** across a 5-level scale: what their social communication looks like most consistently **(Typical Performance/Function)** and what it looks like when they are at their best **(Best Capacity/Function)**
- Can be used by **parents and professionals** familiar with the social communication abilities of their child/youth
  Can be used to **communicate** about **social communication abilities** from one person to another (parent to professional, professional to professional)
- Can be used to **group children/youth** together by their social communication abilities, making it possible to examine what interventions work best with which groups, and perhaps to identify groups of children/youth for research purposes

What the ACSF Tool CANNOT DO …

- Cannot be used with children/youth who are **younger than 24 months of age** or **typically developing**
- Cannot be used to **diagnose or assess** Autism Spectrum Disorders
- Cannot be used to **test** the social communication abilities of children/youth
- Cannot be used as a **checklist** to tick off social communication abilities of children/youth
- Cannot **explain what causes** may be impacting the social communication ability level, related to the child/youth or their environment (but can be used to facilitate a discussion about potential contributing factors)
- Cannot be used to assess social communication abilities **based on a one-time observation** or by someone who is **not familiar with the child/youth**

[1] Di Rezze, B., Gentles, S., Hidecker, M.J., Zwaigenbaum, L., Rosenbaum, P., Duku, E., Georgiades, S., Roncadin, C., Fang, H., Parvinchi, D., & Viveiros, H. (2021). *Adaptation and reliability of the Autism Classification System of Functioning for social communication: from toddlerhood to adolescent-aged children with autism.* Manuscript submitted for publication.
[2] Tajik-Parvinchi, D., Rosenbaum, P., Hidecker, M.J., Duku, E., Zwaigenbaum, L., Roncadin, C., Georgiades, S., Gentles, S., Fang, H., & Di Rezze, B. (2021). *Construct Validity of the Autism Classification System of Functioning: Social Communication (ACSF:SC) Across Childhood and Adolescence.* Manuscript submitted for publication.