

TIME FOR LISTENING

Listening is a life skill - forming the basis of our relationships. It is also crucial for the development of literacy and is a major avenue for learning, both in the home and school environment. Despite the surge in technology in recent decades, nothing will replace the ability to listen to others and what they have to say. In addition, many of the skills used in listening are parallel to attending to and making meaning from what we read. Listening comprehension and reading comprehension go hand in hand.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN LISTENING?

Listening is complex. We must hear what is said and filter out the signal from the background noise. We must focus our attention on the message, discriminating what is relevant from what is not. As we do this we are constantly monitoring our understanding of the message, holding the message in our working memory as we evaluate it and connect it with what we already know. Lastly we begin to formulate our response, either internally or outwardly in action or speech.

Many classrooms feature "listening posters" which identify good listening behaviours for students. However, listening is so much more than "sitting still" or looking at the person who is speaking. Listening is an active process and requires attention, concentration and cognitive effort. We need to explain this to our children and explicitly train them to become better listeners.

SETTING AN EXAMPLE

Many teachers and parents feel that the young children today don't know how to listen. Some suggest possible reasons for this - television, computers, I pods, pace of living, busy lifestyle to name just a few. Families can take some positive actions to reduce negative influences on children's listening behaviour. Simple steps like encouraging families to enjoy mealtimes together without the television on, reading stories out loud each evening or playing language games whilst travelling by car, will promote communication - both listening and speaking.

Yet criticism of current listening behaviours should not be confined to our young people. Children are quick to notice when we are not really listening to them. Perhaps we are looking at them but we are distracted by other thoughts. Whilst impractical to suggest that we must always drop everything and listen attentively to our children or students we do need to ensure that we make time to show interest in and respond to what children have to tell us.

Larry Barker, in his book *Listen Up: What You've Never Heard About the Other Half of Every Conversation*, includes a check list of "irritating habits" that we might exhibit as we communicate with children. These include interrupting, rushing the speaker, finishing off what is being said, forgetting what was said previously and asking too many questions about details.

LISTENING SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Babies, toddlers and very young children do most of their learning through 'doing' - handling and playing with real objects and exploring their world through all of the senses. Language accompanies these 'hands on' experiences - both listening and speaking. As children grow older and their language skills develop, we expect more of their ability to "just listen".

Some children may need us to provide ongoing tangible support for listening development.

- Set an atmosphere of interest and enthusiasm in what children have to say.
- Choose topics or activities that will engage children's attention and interest.
- Where practical follow the child's interest even if it is unfamiliar to us.
- Use books, pictures, objects, films and other 'hands on' items to support listening.

As children grow older and are ready to approach more formal listening tasks

- Share the reason for why the child should listen.
- Give a framework e.g. the main thing I want you to listen for/remember is...
- Support with drawings/notes/diagrams.
- Provide a variety of listening activities. (see below)

REASONS FOR LISTENING

Listening facilitates social interaction. It is a major avenue for learning new information, and is essential for successful participation in school or preschool.

Consider some of these reasons for listening -

- to follow instructions
- to answer questions
- to heed warnings
- to respond to social greetings
- to co-operate with others
- to recall information
- to understand a story
- to appreciate and learn songs
- to find out details
- to make a judgement or give an opinion
- to analyse and think about the content of what is said

LET'S GET PRACTICAL!

Listening is an abstract and unseen process and many children benefit from a vivid description or visual cue.

For example you could make large ears and attach them to a head-band.

Children enjoy being active as they engage in listening tasks.

Practical responses might include the following.

- Placing counters on pictures as items are described.
- Using a puppet to act as a listening partner.

- Engaging in pencil and paper tasks e.g. finish or add to a drawing, dot to dot drawings.
- Manipulating small objects according to instructions as in barrier tasks.

Make sure that you allow children sufficient time to listen and process all aspects of the task. Try not to interrupt their train of thought. Some children may need you to repeat what you have said.

Building skills of active listening will take time. Children will enjoy re-visiting the activities and responding to the challenge of completing the tasks under new conditions. For example: without repetition of the instruction, retaining longer sentences, memorizing more words, or completing an activity in a shorter time.

Listening tasks vary a lot in the demands that they make on the child. We suggest that you provide a variety of listening activities such as listening for sounds (first sound in words, rhyme or number syllables), remembering details of information (names of characters, order of events etc), making judgements (good/bad, true/false or possible/impossible), following instructions, understanding stories, including why things happened.

Try some of the following listening activities.

Simon Says!

Young children will enjoy the challenge of listening to and carrying out instructions involving physical movements. Explain to them that unless the instruction begins with "*Simon says*" they must remain still. You can increase the listening demand of the task by giving two and then three stage commands. It is wise to introduce such harder tasks. E.g. *Simon will give you 2 things to do this time.*

Examples: (Simon says) touch your toes, shake your head, clap your hands, jump on the spot, wiggle your hips, poke out your tongue, close your eyes, touch your knees.

Chinese Whispers

This is a group game of passing a whispered message from one person to another until the message gets back to the original player. Children can form a line, standing a little distant from each other. Give the first child a sentence to listen to, remember and then pass on to the next child.

Examples: My sister bought six packets of chocolate biscuits.

Uncle Charlie takes us to the movies every Christmas holidays.

Our dog Foster does tricks with a packet of chips.

Discuss the 'errors' that were created during the passing of the message. For example, the sound similarities between 'licks' and 'tricks' in the last sentence.

Clap your name

Young children love to be the focus of a 'made up story'. Create a story that about an event that the child has been involved in (for example: the day she fell off the skate board) and each time you mention his/her name he/she must clap.

I went shopping (rhyme)

This time-less memory game can be adapted to include a focus on rhyme.

Someone begins by saying *I went shopping and I bought - a pear.*

The next person must add to this and think of something that rhymes with the word.

I went shopping and I bought - a pears and a chair. (mare, some hair, bear, something rare)

I Spy (first sound)

It is more helpful if this game is played using the first sound (not the letter name) as a cue.

I spy with my little eye something in this room (or outside/on the bookshelf etc.) that begins with 'f' - fish, four, fringe, photo. (Remember that this is a sound game so ph is acceptable as it represents the 'f' sound.) Extend this game to include a 'scene' that is not in the immediate environment. For example: *At the farm I might spy with my little eye something beginning with 'g' - goat/garden.*

Riddles

By providing pieces of information one at a time, children will have to listen, hypothesize and build up ideas in their mind to predict the mystery object. Encourage the children to keep listening to information rather than guessing too early.

Examples: *I'm thinking of something that -*

comes in different colours, is long and thin, is used with paper, you can write with it. (pencil)

has four legs, has a mane, is not found on a farm, has stripes. (zebra)

holds lots of things, has a zip, has straps, is worn on your back. (backpack)

What's the odd one?

This listening task involves thinking about words and how they relate to each other. Begin with 3 words and ask the child to choose the word that doesn't belong. Provide an example, firstly explaining what the three items have in common. Then discuss which attribute causes one of them to be the "odd one out". For example - *bus, car, plane - we travel in all of them but the plane is the odd one out because it goes up in the air.*

ball, teddy, doll; dog, bird, cat; apple, banana, pumpkin; metre, kilogram, millimetre;

helmet, scarf, cap; plate, mug, spoon; book, sign, newspaper; tennis, soccer, rugby;

Choose a picture.

From a much loved picture book choose an illustration that has a lot of detail. Provide the child with some counters which are then placed on the exact spot that you describe.

For example - *"Put your counter on ... the little boy who is hiding behind the tree trunk/the family of five who are having a picnic/ the dog with one ear up and one ear down.*

"Copy Cat" with playdough

Whilst playing with playdough introduce a barrier or screen so that you and the child can not see what the other is making. This can be made by propping up a book or a piece of cardboard or using an empty cereal packet. Take turns to give or listen to instructions about what is made with the playdough. Remove the barrier to compare 'creations'.

For example - *This is what I am making - you make the same.*

A big ball and a little ball. Four little balls stacked one on top of the other. A long worm that I have made into a circle shape.

Songs and stories

Learning the words of songs is not easy for young children and you can provide support with actions and pictures. Many of the old favourite action rhymes and songs, (such as Incy Wincy Spider or I know an old lady who swallowed a fly) are now available with added props such as books and puppets. Gradually you can encourage children to recite the words alone.

Reading stories out loud is both enjoyable and beneficial. Favourite stories can be enjoyed over and over. Add a special listening task to a very familiar story by 'reading' incorrectly (change the name of the character for example). The child must listen and correct you.

Taped stories are useful for long car trips and provide opportunities for sustained listening.

Children will enjoy it when adults listen too and discuss what has happened in the story.

Refer to the newsletter 19 - Shared Stories - Preparing for Literacy (March 2007)

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