

Is everybody Listening?

Eleanor Johnson looks at the development of children's ability to listen and pay attention, and suggests strategies for improving both skills...

Listening is a crucial skill for young children to acquire, and I wish I had a penny for every time I have asked children to do it over the years! Listening is one of the basic building blocks of language and communication and, particularly in the early years of education, one of the main vehicles for a child's learning. Up to 80 per cent of learning in the early years is verbal and this is why, as practitioners, we are so concerned to see children with poor listening skills.

It's worth pausing for a moment to consider what we mean when we ask children to listen. We are really saying: can you hear my voice; can you listen to the words I'm saying; can you look at me or the object; can you filter out background noise of other people talking or environmental sounds; can you clearly see the visual stimuli; can you break down my sentences and understand their meaning; and can you sustain all of these at the same time for a reasonable length of time?

Clearly, there is quite a lot going on in this simple question and so it is no surprise that some of our children struggle to listen. We are actually asking them to take part in a complex process which at any point can be disrupted by factors such as the child's stage of

development, cognitive ability, state of mind or health.

Children don't acquire the ability to listen overnight. As with any skill, it has to be practised and encouraged. Understanding the process and developmental steps can help us to nurture these skills and plan appropriate activities.

Sound foundations

When children 'listen' they are actually drawing on three separate processes:

1. Hearing

A child's sense of hearing starts to develop at a very early stage in life. Research has shown that babies develop the ability to hear within the womb and will respond within days of

birth to their mother's voice. The majority of children should be able to use this sense of hearing (although some do have a specific hearing impairment and others may suffer from intermittent hearing loss). However, just because a child can hear us doesn't mean that they are listening!

2. Listening

Babies start listening and reacting to noises, sounds and voices at a very young age. By the time they are four months old, a baby will turn towards the sound of a voice. As a child grows they learn to listen to different sounds and discriminate between them, and to recognise voices and sounds from the world around them. Eventually, children will develop the ability to detect, discriminate between and



Listening and attention are skills which have to be practised.

With your support and understanding of how good listening skills develop, your children will become good listeners

ELEANOR JOHNSON





identify sounds, and understand them (in words and sentences). These skills are absolutely crucial for the development of speech, phonological awareness and, ultimately, reading.

However, whilst children may be able to hear and listen to sounds and voices, they also need to be able to attend to this 'listening' for sustained periods.

3. Attention

In the 1970s, psychologist Joan Reynell defined the different stages of attention a child will move through from birth to the age of about five as follows:

■ **Distractibility, 0–1 years:** babies can only hold their attention for a few moments and they are easily distracted by new sounds or objects.

■ **Single channel attention, 1–2 years:** children begin to focus their attention on one activity and do not like a spoken or visual distraction. We have all spoken to a child so engrossed in an activity that they appear not to hear us at all.

■ **Single channel attention with more flexibility, 2–3 years:** children continue to focus on one activity and still find it difficult to shift their attention when spoken to. However, they do begin to respond to interruptions and distractions if their name is called or a visual distraction is offered. At this stage, children still find it difficult to pay attention to a visual and verbal task at the same time.

■ **Attention under voluntary control, 3–4 years:** children begin to control their own focus of attention and can shift this between an activity and the speaker. However, children still have to look at the person speaking.

■ **Two-channelled attention, 4–5 years:** children can now move their attention between an activity and a speaker without stopping to look at them. Their attention span may still be short, but children are now ready to pay attention within a group. Children can now attend to a visual and verbal activity at the same time.

■ **Fully integrated attention, 5 years onwards:** children can now carry out a task, focus their attention in various sized groups, ignore distractions and maintain their attention for a reasonable length of time.

It is important to note that not all children will follow these stages rigidly. Also, as mentioned earlier, other factors can temporarily affect children's ability to listen and attend.

Poor listening and attention skills

We can recognise easily the children who have successfully developed these listening skills. Our concern arises for the children who haven't, the ones who are 'not listening', and these difficulties can impact on a child in many ways.

Sound awareness

Children with poor listening skills will find it difficult to discriminate between sounds, for example, the different sounds human voices, or the noises various animals, make. They may struggle to identify different elements of sounds such as loudness or tone which makes the difference between an angry voice and a happy voice.

Reading and phonological awareness

Children with poor listening skills will struggle to attend in groups for sustained periods. They will find noisy environments too distracting. Listening to stories will be problematic and they will easily lose the understanding of the story.

Another important aspect of listening is the ability to distinguish the sounds in words. Children need to be able to hear the different elements of a word such as syllables or phonemes. Distinguishing between these sounds will allow a child to eventually blend and segment words.

These listening skills form the basis of phonological awareness and without this, a child will struggle to learn to read.

Play and socialising

Poor listening skills can have a huge impact on a child's life and learning. A failure to attend and listen can lead to difficulties in understanding, following and completing





tasks successfully. This may then lead to low self-esteem and behavioural problems.

Difficulties with listening and attention can impact on a child's play and the ability to make friends. A child flitting from toy to toy will not be engaging in meaningful and quality play which helps them gain valuable experiences and knowledge. If children are easily distracted they will find it difficult to remain part of group play and all of the associated benefits this brings for a child's language development and social skills.

Language and communication

Poorly developed listening skills may also have an impact on a child's language and communication development. Listening to other people speaking enables children to develop vocabulary, comprehension and language skills. These important communication skills are the building bricks of literacy and learning.

find out more

Eleanor Johnson has taught children at both the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1, as well as those with speech and language difficulties, and spent two years as Project Coordinator for an award-winning language intervention project. She is co-creator of the StoryPhones digital audio system. Visit storyphones.co.uk

Supporting listening skills

It may seem daunting when faced with children who struggle to listen and attend; however, there are many ways in which you can help to improve your children's listening skills, some of which you are probably doing already without realising it. Below is a simple check list of ideas to help nurture good listeners.

- Be aware of the stages of attention development, and plan activities to encourage children to move on to the next stage.
- Use audio resources as part of your children's regular activities. Audio stories, songs, and listening games such as environmental sounds will all help your children to develop listening skills.
- Plan regular listening activities into your week. There are a huge number of games and ideas available to develop listening skills. However, simple ideas such as Stop/Go games, Listening Moments or Musical Statues can all be easily played without the need for expensive resources or props.
- Be a good role-model. As adults, we need to be good listeners ourselves. When talking to children, get down to their level, make eye contact and ask open-ended questions listen to their opinions and show interest in what they are saying.
- Encourage children to listen to each other in different situations and to value listening.
- Think about where you position your seat: the window or picture behind you may prove to be too distracting.
- Sit children with listening difficulties directly in front of you. This way, you can make eye

contact easily and use their name to prompt their attention.

- Use 'good listening' prompts and create your own good listening rules.
- Regulate the group size to fit the needs of your children's listening skills. Children who struggle to listen will benefit from working within smaller groups.
- Encourage participation. If children are struggling to listen to a story, pause, ask questions or ask them to find objects in a picture.
- Your environment can contribute to distractions: such things as hard floors and traffic noise can add to the noise level.
- Create quiet areas, dens and hideaway spaces for children to spend quiet moments.
- Have a basket of 'fidget' toys to hand. You can also use special cushions to help a child stay in the same place.

All ears

Online resources for children and practitioners...

Encourage listening skills:

storyphones.co.uk/resources/downloads.html
bbc.co.uk/schoolradio
cheekymonkeyresources.co.uk/cmrmusic

Learn about listening and attention:

hello.org.uk
literacytrust.org.uk
www.ican.org.uk