

Promoting listening skills: information for parents

Listening is a complex process made up of many skills. However, there has been research which has demonstrated an improvement in children who work on their attention, memory and vision. This leaflet has been created to help you further develop these skills.

Introduction

Listening is a complex process that requires good hearing, as well as developed skills in attention, memory and vision. Each element is explained briefly below:

- **Hearing:** If the ability to hear quiet sounds is compromised, then listening may be difficult, especially in challenging listening environments such as a noisy classroom.
- **Attention:** Helps our brain to process information that we are interested in and filter out the non-relevant information.
- **Memory:** Helps us to retain information which allows the brain to process this more effectively.
- **Vision:** Vision provides cues such as lip reading and body language, which are vital for listening. Should a child's vision be compromised this may have an effect on their listening skills.
- **Relaxation:** Anxiety can cause stress. Stress can affect concentration, memory and attention, which are all needed for listening.

Adults have a natural advantage over children as their existing language knowledge helps them with listening. Adults have the ability to predict what comes next and substitute what they have misheard. This is a useful skill when listening when there is background noise. Promoting good listening skills involves developing the above elements further and practising them. Good listening skills have been linked to doing well at school.

The continual process of brain development as a child has been shown to improve listening skills, e.g. a child over the age of 12 is able to perform better in listening to speech in the presence of background noise when compared to younger children.

How to further develop listening skills

Please note that **ALL** of the above skills will develop naturally whilst your child performs everyday activities. However, should there be a temporary disruption to the natural development (this could be due to a child's hearing being reduced temporarily due to glue ear), then some specific hearing skills could be delayed for that period of time.

As parents, you can develop the above skills by following recommended activities; this is in the same way that playing a sport further develops our physical skills. Any activity should be sufficiently challenging and repeated over extended periods of time to be likely to be effective.

Improving hearing and listening skills

- Playing localisation games such as:
 - Blindfolding the child who then tries to 'catch' the other players. The other players may give subtle sound cues. A source of background noise can be added (e.g. radio) in later stages
 - Playing 'I hear with my little ear...' games
 - Hiding a clock or other sound-making device in a room and trying to find it
- Playing sound identification games such as:
 - Commenting on sounds heard in nature.
 - Recording sounds on a device and asking your child to identify the source of the sound
 - Finding a rhyming pair of words (e.g. 'What rhymes with 'pat'?)
 - Clap in a rhythmic sequence and ask your child to imitate the sequence
 - Making various sounds and the child has to say whether the sound is quieter/louder, nearer/further, higher in pitch (squeaky)/lower (boomy in sound)
- Playing sound matching games such as:
 - Hitting one of a selection of various objects with a spoon and asking your child to 'guess' which object it was
 - Striking a note on an instrument and asking the child to 'guess' which sound it was
- Commercially available training programmes such as:
 - SoundStorm (app): This helps children that have a specific difficulty combining the information provided from both ears and can help them attend to a specific source of sound in background noise. This difficulty is more common in children with history of 'glue ear'. Available through App Store. For further info visit <http://nal.gov.au/>
 - Earobics
 - FastForWord
 - Phonomena
- Applications and the web: Search word ideas: sound matching, sound segmentation.
- Musical training improves memory and the ability to tell the difference between frequencies. It has been shown that musicians hear speech better in the presence of background noise than non-musicians. Learning music can benefit hearing and listening. Passively listening to music does not have the same effect.

Improving attention skills

Generally, activities that require the child to follow instructions or attend to sounds can improve attention skills. Some ideas of activities for this are given below:

- Board games such as 'Cluedo'.
- 'Simon says' (an online version is available on www.freesimon.org/welcome)
- Read a story with your child and ask them questions about the sequence of events (e.g. what happened first etc...).

- The child closes their eyes and the adult makes repetitive sounds. Child has to then tell how many times they heard the sound. This can be done faster/slower to match child's abilities.

Improving memory skills

- Games such as 'I went to the shop...'
- Applications and the web: Search word ideas: auditory memory, working memory, remembering, following instructions, following directions.

Vision

If you are concerned about your child's listening skills, it is a good idea to rule out vision problems as a possible contributor. Increasing visual cues (e.g. facing the speaker or enough lighting in the room) is a good hearing tactic to improve listening.

Promoting relaxation

- Identify any anxiety triggers that cause poor listening in certain environments.
- Low expectations lead to decrease in performance (self-fulfilling prophesy). Reward good listening skills rather than comment on poor listening skills.

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