

Listening, attending and observing

Listening and attention skills are the building blocks of speech and language development. The acquisition of these skills is vital in the early years if you want your child to be successful at school. The development of these skills is facilitated by interaction with others, with having a shared focus with others, and playing in an environment that is free of distractions. Listening, is not the same as hearing. A child can have perfect hearing, but be a very poor listener. Children with Autism, Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder or Auditory Processing Disorders will have difficulties with listening, remembering, and following verbal instructions. (see www.icommunicatetherapy.com for more information and strategies to facilitate listening, attention and communication). Children that have had a lack of social interaction or poor role modelling in the early years of their lives may present with listening and attention difficulties. Studies are also showing that over exposure to television from a young age can have detrimental long term effects on listening and attention skills.

Some children find these skills more difficult to master than others. There are lots of ways to enhance your children's listening and attention skills, not least by turning off the television and spending some quality time with them. Try to find activities that share your attention that you can both enjoy and focus on together. Also, don't forget to praise *good listening* and *good looking*.

Observation skills

These skills require the child to stop and focus on a particular task. Having a shared focus helps this process. The activities mentioned below require your child to focus on a task for a few minutes and really use their observation skills. These tasks would preferably be done at a table-top as a shared focus activity. The type of task will depend on the age of your child.

Listening and attention

Our brains are very skilled at helping us attend to tasks and selecting what is important. Everyday we use different types of attention skills:

Selective attention

This allows us to select what is important and what we can ignore. If we are in a busy office and other people are talking and phones are ringing, our selective attention skills mean we can generally block out the background noise and attend to what we are doing. If we get tired this task becomes more difficult. Some children (and adults) have difficulty blocking out the unimportant stuff (children with autism often have this difficulty) and so are easily distracted by other noises or visual stimuli.



Alternating attention

Alternating attention allows us to switch between activities and have the ability to always pick up where we left off with each activity. For instance, I could be ironing a shirt and keeping an eye on the dinner cooking at the same time, when the pot boils over, I put down the iron and turn the cooker down, then go back to the ironing and continue from where I left. People with difficulties alternating attention, might forget about the cooking and concentrate on the ironing, and when the pot boils over, they may attend to the cooker, but forget to go back to the ironing.

Divided attention

Divided attention is different to alternating attention because it describes how we can do 2 things at once. A good example would be driving and talking at the same time. In the classroom it may be writing and listening to the teacher.

Although listening, observing and attention skills are quite unique in their own ways, they are also very much interlinked. Listening and observing allows you to take in the auditory and visual stimuli, but attention allows you select the important stimuli or process and react to several stimuli at the same time.

Activities for Listening and Attention Skills

Matching: matching pictures that are the same, or matching colours is a very simple game, but it is a good way to involve a young child. Make some small pictures of the same dog and several small pictures of the same cat, then colour them all in different colours. You can now match up the colours, or match the dogs and the cats. Increase the number of different coloured animals to make the task harder.



Cutting out and colouring: this requires observation, attention, and fine motor skills. Your child has to concentrate and attend to what they are doing for several minutes.

Odd one out tasks: looking at pictures together and trying to spot the difference or “odd one out”, is a great way to use looking and attention skills. Other skills will probably also come into play such as categorization (odd one out), attention to detail (spot the difference), *same / different* concepts (odd one out, spot the difference).



Most table top activities are good vehicles to work on listening, attention and observation skills. Even playing a board games can allow for lots of interaction and development (listening, attention, turn-taking, speech, language etc)



Listening can be difficult for some children so it is important we try and find activities that are fun and engaging. Activities should be relatively easy to start with, short, and offer quick success and rewards. These activities can then be developed as the child's skills develop, by making the tasks a little longer and more difficult. Building their confidence early on will encourage them to try things that are more challenging.

1. The name game: this can be played with 2 or more people and a ball. One person is the name caller and he will call out lots of fictitious names/words, but occasionally name himself or another person in the group. The person holding the ball must listen and throw the ball to the named person, or to anyone if they hear their own name called. There are lots of variations to this game and it is nice and simple, but requires concentration and good listening. It also involves some divided attention skills because the listener has to listen and then coordinate their motor skills to throw the ball.

2. Listening for colours: make, or find a series of coloured pictures or objects e.g. 6 pictures of the same dog coloured differently. Tell the child to listen out for yellow dog and tap her finger on the table every time she hears it. Then proceed to name the coloured dogs in no particular order for 1 minute. The child has to concentrate and listen for "yellow dog". You can increase the difficulty of this game by increasing the time of the task, asking your child to listen for 2 colours, or adding coloured cats and then listening out for one coloured cat and a different coloured dog.

3. Ready, steady.....wait.....Go: you can use a number of toys for this game (ball, toy car, row of dominoes, balloon), but the object of the game is to get your child to wait and listen. Get them to hold the toy ready to let it go and say "ready... steady", then pause and let them wait for you to say "GO". You can increase the pause between words, or say "wait.....wait", before you say "GO".

With these games it is important to start off with tasks that are easy and the child can accomplish without difficulty. Then start to increase the complexity or the length of time that the child has to listen and attend to the task. Keep a log of the progress so you can see if their listening skills are developing.

Anytime can be a good time for listening games, so alert your child to sounds, raise their awareness of sounds, and add language whenever you have an opportunity. Turn off the TV and do things!!!



For more information on child development, and activities to develop speech and language skills see our website www.icommunicatetherapy.com



To learn more about child development, communication, and developing your child's speech and language skills, you can read about and purchase books on our website www.icommunicatetherapy.com. Click this link to see our online Resource Centre

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Suggested Reading

Developing Child, The by Helen Bee and Denise Boyd

Milestones: Normal Speech And Language Development Across the Lifespan
by Jr., Ph.D. Oller, et al John W.

Let's Talk Together - Home Activities for Early Speech & Language Development
by Amy Chouinard and Cory Poland

Born to Talk: An Introduction to Speech and Language Development by Lloyd M. Hulit and Merle R. Howard

Speaking, Listening and Understanding: Games for Young Children by Catherine Delamain and Jill Spring

Childhood Speech, Language & Listening Problems: What Every Parent Should Know by Patricia McAleer Hamaguchi

The Parents Guide to Speech and Language Problems by Debbie Feit

The Handbook of Child Language Disorders by Richard G. Schwartz

Does My Child Have a Speech Problem? by Katherine L. Martin

Introduction to Children with Language Disorders by Vicki A. Reed

Children with Specific Language Impairment (Language, Speech, and Communication) by Laurence B. Leonard

Language Disorders: A Functional Approach to Assessment and Intervention
by Robert E. Owens

The Handbook of Child Language Disorders by Richard G. Schwartz