

Children's Speech and Language Therapy Service

Supporting Listening and Attention

The ability to pay attention and listen to other people talking is really important for all areas of learning including language development. This is something everyone can help your child to learn how to do and does not require targeted Speech and Language Therapy support.

What is listening?

Listening is more than simply hearing spoken language. In order to listen effectively, children need to be able to:-

- Discriminate between different words or different phonemes
- Remember what they have just heard
- Make sense of what they have heard
- Link new learning to previous knowledge
- Select what is relevant in a message or communication

These are skills that children need to learn and adults need to teach.

What is attention?

Attention is the ability to actively focus on certain aspects of experience or stimuli whilst ignoring other aspects. For example concentrating on a task and giving it your whole attention or being able to listen to someone who is speaking to you whilst ignoring background noise.

The ability to maintain and control attention develops in parallel with speech and language skills, so children who have delayed or disordered language development often also have attention difficulties.

Things which suggest the child is struggling to listen and attend -

- The child is very **easily distracted**, particularly by noises or visual stimuli.
- The child is **slow to start** a task, finds it **difficult to concentrate** and often **does not finish**. This may be because he has **not been able to listen** to or follow the instructions.
- The child tends to **daydream** and **wander** around the classroom. He often appears to **ignore others**, particularly if he is absorbed in a task of choice. At other times he **appears to be listening** but has **difficulty understanding** what is said.
- The child is very easily distracted and tends to flit from one activity to another. He is often over-active and restless. He has difficulty with organisation.

Factors that can affect listening and attention

- The length of time the child has to focus.
- The nature of the activity and the child's interest in it.

- required to complete it - the more demanding and challenging the task, the more attention is needed.
- The child's understanding of the language, including the vocabulary.
- The context - the place where the activity is taking place: external distractions and the size and composition of the group
- Time of day - some children are at their best in the morning, others at other times.
- Energy levels - attention may be lower just before or just after lunch or at end of the day.
- Physical factors such as temperature and health.
- Sensory factors such as intermittent hearing loss

Strategies to help listening and attention skills -

1. Reduce environmental distractions

- Try and reduce distractions during active listening times. For example, signs on the door to indicate 'Do not disturb unless an emergency'.

- Using screens to reduce visual distractions or having an area in the classroom with less visual stimuli.

2. Teach and practise good listening.

- Teach active listening skills to the whole class. Use the picture cue cards and demonstrate good listening using puppets or role play. This needs to be reinforced throughout the day and ideally should be a whole school approach.

- Use of cue cards to reinforce the listening rules

- All pupils need to know *explicitly* what listening involves i.e. Good sitting (not swinging on chair backs/ fidgeting), eyes looking at the speaker, lips closed - only one person talks at a time, brain thinking about what the speaker is saying, ears listening etc.

3. Modify teacher language

- Ensure the level and pace of your language is appropriate. Break information into smaller chunks and use visual cues to support.

- Demonstrate activities where possible or use picture/written task plans to help the child/children stay focused.

- Consider the length of task. Include learning breaks such as brain gym activities to break up the activity. Remember to think about the developmental stages of listening and attention.

- Gain the attention of the child/children first before giving the instruction. For example 'Jonny, please put your coat on' rather than 'Put your coat on Jonny', or to the whole class 'Can you show me good listening? 'Now, go and get your pencils'.

- Sit the pupil at the front. Pupils may then see visual cue cards more easily.

- Use materials that are visually interesting, attractive and appropriate for the pupils' learning level.

- Use a visual or auditory signal to gain attention, e.g. tambourine or hands up when changing activities with less visual stimuli.