

Listening and Attention

The need to develop good listening and attention skills is fundamental to young children's communication, thinking and learning. When we think about these skills in children we often think of "listening and attention" as one skill (i.e. how long can you listen for?) In reality they are two separate skills. To understand how these skills develop and know how to support children, we need to analyse them in more detail.

What is listening?

"Listening" is a complex, neurological skill which starts to develop from birth. The ability to listen involves children learning how to concentrate on one auditory signal which they can hear. This auditory signal could be an environmental noise or a person's voice. Children gradually learn to filter out competing distractions in order to do this. These distractions could be:

- Auditory distractions - background noise
- Visual distractions – things to look at
- Kinaesthetic distractions – things to touch and feel

What is attention?

"Attention" involves the ability to sustain "listening" for increasingly longer periods of time once the basic skill of listening is established. Children's attention span will generally increase with age, but listening in larger groups and in distracting situations will place more demands on these skills.

How do children learn to listen?

In order to learn how to listen, babies and young children need to experience "quiet times" which are relatively distraction free. During these times, children learn to focus and build the skills they will need in more distracting environments.

Very young children also learn to listen by spending one-to-one time with an adult. The child's listening and attention skills are gradually encouraged by the adult interacting and taking turns with the child. During play activities, adults extend these skills further by following the child's lead and making a simple running commentary on what is happening. This is a much more successful strategy than asking lots of questions.

As children get older and their listening skills mature, they will gradually learn to transfer their skills to group situations and activities. At first, these groups need to be very small or have lots of adult support. As the children's skills develop further, they will gradually learn to listen in larger groups. Children will find it more difficult to listen within distracting environments no matter what the size of the group.

The issues?

Practitioners have reported for a long time that listening and attention skills in young children are gradually deteriorating. This is now backed up by research. Fifty percent of children are presenting with listening and language skills at a lower stage of development than that expected for their age. In some areas, the percentage of children with difficulties is even higher.

It is suspected that increasing difficulties with listening and attention are the result of changes in the environment and the way we bring up children in the modern world. Busy, distracting homes where the child has almost continuous access to television, computers and electronic toys mean that the essential "quiet times" are increasingly rare. Children are therefore living in an increasingly visual world where they are tuning into pictures and lights rather than sounds and words.

The implications?

The development of good listening and attention is an essential pre-requisite for many important skills. Listening and attention is fundamental to the development of communication, speech and language and literacy. Difficulties with listening and attention will also impact on children's ability to develop and extend their play, to socialise and to learn about the world around them.

Top Tips for Supporting Listening and Attention Skills

The following strategies can be used to support the development of listening and attention skills in **all** children. They are, however, particularly useful with younger children and for those with delayed listening and attention skills.

- **Minimise distractions** – Listening involves the ability to filter out distractions which is more difficult in a distracting environment. It helps if you remove distractions, such as toys, displays, open shelving and clutter from the area where you want children to listen.
- **Reduce group size** – Children learn to listen during one-to-one situations and then in groups of gradually increasing size. Some children take much longer to cope with group activities than others. Reducing the group size will have a positive impact on listening and attention levels.
- **Keep your language simple** – Children who are young and/or have delayed listening and attention usually do not understand as much as we think. We can encourage listening and attention by simplifying what we say and “chunking” longer sentences into a series of shorter sentences.
- **Maximise non-verbal communication** – Using exaggerated facial expression and gestures as we talk helps children to listen and understand.
- **Use visual clues** – Using pictures and props alongside spoken language supports listening and attention. Children’s auditory skills are therefore supported by visual attention.
- **Encourage participation** – Listening is often viewed as a passive activity where children have to keep still. Encouraging and allowing them to join in with gestures, props and movement will help them to listen and maintain their attention for longer.
- **Repeat, repeat, repeat** – Young children thrive on repetition. Repetition of stories, rhymes and activities is even more beneficial for children with delayed listening and attention.
- **Sit the child who finds it tricky to listen opposite you** – This will allow the child to gain maximum benefit from visual and non-verbal clues and will also enable you to monitor their listening and attention levels more closely.
- **Give the child who finds it tricky to listen something to hold** – This helps many children to listen and decreases the need for children to seek out their own things to touch and feel.
- **Encourage turn-taking** – Most children with delayed listening and attention also have difficulties taking turns. Increasing a child’s ability to take turns at a very simple level, e.g. taking it in turns to put a brick on a tower, will have a positive impact on their listening.

How do StoryPhones support Listening and Attention?

StoryPhones have been specifically designed to develop children’s listening and attention skills. As they are an audio ICT resource they encourage children to listen and focus on an auditory signal. StoryPhones can be used to encourage listening to stories, music, songs and rhymes, spoken language or parts of words. This allows listening to be developed across the curriculum and become a vehicle for learning.

As children learn to listen they also learn to process increasingly complicated auditory signals. At first they learn to listen and respond to environmental sounds, then to spoken language and eventually to parts of words, e.g. syllables and phonemes. The activities which have been developed for use with StoryPhones target listening at all of these levels in order to meet the needs of children at different ages and stages of development.