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# Teaching Young Children to Become **Better** Listeners

Mary Renck Jalongo

**O**f all the language skills that human beings acquire, listening is the one they use the most throughout life, particularly during early childhood. A human's sense of hearing operates even before birth, as soon as the hearing organs of the fetus are fully formed and functional. Newborns respond to differences in sound from their earliest days of life and are sensitive to pitch and rhythm (Saffran & Griepentrog 2001). Interestingly, most babies are born with the ability to perceive letter sounds (phonemes). Most four-week-old babies can detect the difference between *g* and *k*, for example (Richgels 2001). By toddlerhood, many children develop a sensitivity to the sounds of language (phonemic awareness). By two years of age, most children can detect the subtle differences between the words *hot*, *not*, and *lot* or between *cat*, *cut*, and *cot* (Goswami 2001). Evidently, children (at least those without hearing impairments) amass extensive experience with listening long before they speak, read, or write.

Effective listening is more than hearing, however. Listening is "the necessary, interactive process that enables the brain to construct meaning from the sounds that are heard" (McSporran 1997, 15). Suppose that an adult asks a young child, "How old are you?" Unless the

child hears the speech, interprets the speaker's meaning, formulates an answer, and responds, we cannot be confident that he or she really has listened. As this simple example illustrates, listening is neither innate nor passive. Rather, listening skills must be *taught* if they are to improve, and listening well is an *active* process. Listening plays an essential role in learning, but expecting children to listen *more* is not the answer; teaching them how to listen *better* is (DeHaven 1983). How can early childhood practitioners support children in developing more effective listening skills?

## Am I a model of good listening habits?

Do you think you are a good listener? Try timing yourself for just five minutes during a conversation and see whether you can listen without interrupting, fidgeting, or allowing your attention to wander. Most adults find this extremely difficult to do, yet they expect even more from the least experienced listeners, young children. Even when adults can keep quiet for five minutes, studies show that their listening efficiency is only about 25 percent, meaning that the majority of adults attentively listen and actively process what they hear just one-quarter of the time (Hunsaker 1990). Yet studies also show that, in educational settings and in homes, young children are expected to listen to adults nearly half of the time they are interacting (Wolvin & Coakley 1988). Even in active, developmentally appropriate, and effective classrooms, children are expected to devote about 25 percent of their time to listening, to the teacher and their peers (Hiebert 1990).

These findings suggest a double standard where adults' own listening behavior and the listening behavior expected from children are concerned. Young chil-

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dren learn not only from our words but also from our actions. If adults expect undivided attention *from* children, they must also give undivided attention *to* them. Teachers who model good listening habits get down to the child's eye level, hear the child out, and strive to understand the child's meaning. Another indication that teachers are good listeners is an overall balance in the amount of teacher talk—teachers need to be listeners, observers, and questioners a significant portion of the time they spend interacting with children.

The nature of the questions that teachers ask is all-important. If a child says, "I got new shoes!" the teacher needs to listen rather than stop communication ("They're very nice") or drill ("What colors are they?"). The very best questions, the ones that let children know we are really listening, have answers that we do not already know. Teachers do better to say, "Tell me all about getting your new shoes" and direct their questions or comments to what the child just said. Here is a continuation of the conversation about new shoes. Notice how the teacher follows the child's lead:

**Child:** My aunt bought 'em for me at Kmart last night.

**Teacher:** They have lots of shoes at Kmart. How did you decide which ones to get?

**Child:** Mommy said I had to get ones that tie for school, and I tried 'em on.

**Teacher:** So they fit and they tie—those are good reasons. Is there anything else you like about them?

**Child:** They have my favorite colors, pink and purple.

**Teacher:** I didn't know pink and purple were your favorite colors. When you paint today, let's mix some colors together and see if we can make bright pink and light purple.

**Child:** (smiles) OK!

As this example illustrates, when listening to children, adults should hold themselves to the same high standards they would use with their best friend or supervisor. This means concentrating on the child's message, knowing when to listen rather than talk, and listening "between the lines" to implicit as well as explicit meaning (Hinds & Pankake 1987).

Another way that a teacher models good listening habits is by reassuring children that they will be heard.

In a group setting, children sometimes become so preoccupied with getting a turn that they stop listening. A teacher can reduce that worry and improve children's listening by making a simple comment such as, "Don't worry, everyone will get a turn to share an observation about the guinea pig," and then following through on it.

### **Do I know what influences children's listening?**

What interferes with effective listening? There are three basic categories of problems: (1) not being able to hear (auditory reception)—e.g., hearing impairments, temporary hearing problems caused by ear infections or allergies; (2) not being able to make sense of what was heard (auditory processing)—e.g., learning difficulties, language disorders, language processing problems; and (3) inadequate skills—e.g., inexperience as a language user/limited proficiency, inexperience in learning to focus and concentrate in the presence of competing demands for attention.

Why should teachers be concerned about children's listening effectiveness? Recent research builds a compelling argument for ensuring that all children get the best opportunity to hear as well as to understand what they hear:

- Comprehensible input is essential for acquiring language; in fact, the number one reason for language delays in young children is undetected hearing difficulties that interfere with comprehension (McCormick, Loeb, & Schiefelbusch 1997).
- Seven million children in the United States have diagnosed hearing difficulties (Niskar & Kieszak 1998). On any given day, one-quarter to one-third of kindergarten and first grade students in the United States have hearing difficulties, both diagnosed and undiagnosed, that interfere with their hearing (Flexer 1999).
- Listening is one of the skills most predictive of long-term school success (Brigman et al. 1999). Attention to developing phonological awareness in the early years is a way to enhance children's reading effectiveness (Adams, Treiman, & Pressley 1998).
- Increasingly, experts are recommending the equivalent of "glasses for the ears" (DeAnda 2000), or sound amplification. Sound amplification can take many forms, such as a wireless microphone worn by the teacher or an unobtrusive device worn by the child (Crandell, Smaldino, & Flexer 1995; Crandell 1996).
- Improving young children's ability to hear and make meaning from speech increases their attention and participation. It also reduces the effort they must make in order to listen, particularly for children who wear hearing aids or who are English-language learners.



## Does my environment support listening?

Effective listening depends as much upon the ability to filter sensory input (sounds, sights, etc.) as it does upon taking in information. At any given moment, hundreds of noises, messages, and distractions vie for children's attention. Creating a listening environment means the teacher makes deliberate efforts to help children focus, to eliminate distractions, and to reduce barriers to their listening. When we think of obstacles to listening, we immediately think of hearing loss or impairment, yet many other conditions interfere with listening because "we hear with our ears, but we listen with our minds" (Garman & Garman 1992, 5). Conditions affecting a child physically, such as fatigue, abuse, hunger, illness, bathroom needs, or room temperature, can interfere with listening. Psychological factors, such as mental health, intellectual ability, attention span, ability to focus, language proficiency, interest in the message, perceptions of the speaker, ability to process information at the speaker's rate, and self-esteem as a listener/learner, all exert an influence (Garman & Garman 1992).

Actually, classrooms and other educational settings often are poor listening environments for at least four reasons: (1) poor acoustics or other sound distortions, (2) background noise or unwanted sounds that compete with the message, (3) children positioned at various distances from the speaker, and (4) frequent interruptions (McSporran 1997; Petry, McClellan, & Myler 2001).

Teachers can work to create a better listening environment by attending to children's physical needs (arranging a health and hearing screening, recommending access to a free breakfast program); rearranging the room (setting up a quiet corner, creating a circle time area); establishing special routines (using a cleanup song, setting soft lighting for story time); using visual aids (real objects, a short list of illustrated instructions); providing a variety of listening experiences (filling a basket with music cassettes, taking a walk outdoors to listen for winter sounds); and using procedures that minimize distractions (directing children to close their eyes and imagine, putting up a Do Not Disturb sign during read-aloud time).

## Do I set a purpose for children's listening?

There is a useful distinction between listening *to* and listening *for* something (Funk & Funk 1989). Teachers can have children listen for any of the following purposes: to enjoy, to react, to act upon, to appreciate, to make decisions, to get information, to recognize danger, to develop thinking skills, or to form attitudes (Garman & Garman 1992). The teacher who says in frustration, "I want you to listen carefully to every word I say," must

realize that this advice does little to promote effective listening.

Consider the experience of a librarian who visited a first grade. The teacher directed the children to use their "active listening skills." They responded by sitting up straight in their chairs, folding their hands, and keeping their eyes riveted on the speaker. Yet when the librarian was finished and she asked the children about the main idea of her presentation—how to get a library card—the room fell silent. The children had concentrated so much on outward signs of listening that their comprehension had suffered. A better approach would have been for the teacher to set a specific purpose for listening: "Our visitor today is Ms. Smail, the librarian. As she talks with us, I want you to listen for the answers to two questions: What kinds of things does the library have for children to use? and What do you have to do to borrow something from the library?" Pointing out in advance what is important to learn helps children channel their energies appropriately and concentrate on meaning.


## Do I communicate clearly?

A director of a chain of child care centers once remarked, "Whenever I observe in these centers, I try to look at things from the child's perspective. Looking at



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things this way, I see adults tuning children out, telling them to be quiet, discouraging children from asking questions, or giving long, confusing instructions. After watching how some of the parents (and, unfortunately, a few teachers) interact with young children, I have begun to wonder if the adults aren't as much to blame as the children."

This supervisor's comment raises an important issue: Effective listening relies upon clear communication. Teachers often complain that children do not follow directions, but what objective assessment do we have of whether those directions were clear? McDevitt (1990) found that children tended to blame *themselves* when they did not understand a message that researchers had made deliberately ambiguous. When the children in that study were asked what a confused listener should do, they recommended waiting for the speaker to clarify, listening more carefully, or asking someone other than the teacher for clarification. Young children can be intimidated by a classroom situation and feel that it is not their place to ask questions of the teacher. However, as Eleanor Duckworth points out, the responsibility to listen well applies equally to children and adults:

A good listener, or a good understander of explanations, is aware that her first interpretation of what is being said may not be the right one, and she keeps making guesses about what other interpretations are possible. This ability is singularly undeveloped in little children, but it should be highly developed in teachers who try to listen to what children are trying to say to them. (1996, 22)

Such characteristics of the young child as a listener place even more responsibility on the early childhood educator to communicate effectively. A teacher cannot assume that her messages, instructions, and intentions are clear simply because *she* understands them and the children do not raise questions. She must keep instructions simple, think them through carefully, organize them in a step-by-step fashion, try to anticipate possible sources of confusion, and give children a chance to rehearse each step in the instructions.

### **Do I assess children's background knowledge and keep them actively involved?**

Active listening occurs when listeners understand the message and *act upon* what they have heard (Brent & Anderson 1993). Assessing the listeners' prior knowledge helps set the stage for understanding and action,

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yet it is one of the most neglected aspects of teaching. The experience of one second grade teacher illustrates how to assess children's prior knowledge, maintain their involvement, and thereby improve their listening habits:

The teacher decides to read the class a book titled *Martin's Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (by D. Rappaport; Hyperion, 2001). But instead of just pulling the book from the shelf and reading it, she decides to use a strategy called K-W-L (see Ogle

1986). She begins by creating a chart on poster paper with three columns: *What We Know*, *What We Want to Know*, and *What We Learned* about Martin Luther King Jr. She and the children complete the first two columns before she reads the picture book; the last one they complete afterward. In looking over the results of this activity as shown in the K-W-L chart (opposite), we can see how well the children listened, how much they learned, and how much their teacher learned about them by being a good listener herself.

Children listen better when they know that they will be called upon to reflect and respond. Strategies to prompt active listening include restating ("Who can tell me the first thing that you need to do if you want to play a CD?"), summarizing ("What were the most interesting things about our trip to the post office?"), reflecting ("If you could fly like the little girl in *Tar Beach*, what would you see?"), and self-assessment ("Tell us about how you worked in your group today"). Research shows that children actively engaged in learner-centered child care environments have better *receptive language skills*, meaning skills where success depends upon the ability to receive as well as interpret a message (Dunn, Beach, & Kontos 1994).

### **Do I work with families to build listening skills at home?**

As with other types of learning, children's listening skills begin at home and progress more rapidly if families and schools communicate and collaborate. An emphasis on effective listening in family literacy programs can help (Swick, DaRos, & Kovach 2001). One great advantage of sharing information with families about improving children's listening is that nearly all parents immediately recognize the importance of listening. "Your Child Can Be a Better Listener! Here's



How" (on page 33) is an example of a flyer that teachers can send home to families (text adapted from Garman & Garman 1992; Konecki 1992). In one intervention study, the parents of children with communication difficulties were supplied with home activity packets to promote shared listening. The researchers reported that providing families with clear guidelines had positive effects on parents' attitudes as well as their children's listening skills (Stevens, Watson, & Dodd 2001).

### **Do I address listening goals in the curriculum?**

As one Head Start teacher of four-year-olds said, "Even though I believe that being a good listener is important throughout life, I also believe that good listening habits begin early. Still, I am not certain that I am doing enough to support the children's development of listening skills." One of the best ways to make certain that listening is addressed is to identify listening goals and incorporate them into the curriculum guide and children's portfolios (O'Neal 1993).

For infants, teachers might select a goal such as "Responds to music" (e.g., calms to a lullaby, moves arms and legs in response to lively music). For toddlers, some suitable goals might be "Follows simple instructions" (e.g., responds to request to bring a ball) or "Listens to board books and nursery rhymes." For preschoolers and children in the primary grades, goals might include "Follows a sequence of directions" (e.g., complies with directions to put on a smock, paint a picture, take off and hang up the smock, and wash hands), "Enjoys listening to stories," "Retells familiar stories," and "Listens and responds to finger plays, action rhymes, and singing games."

When teachers are asked to think of a listening activity that they do in their classrooms, they commonly mention such things as giving children practice in following directions, making a tape of familiar sounds and asking children to identify them, and reading stories aloud. Why might it be difficult for teachers to think of specific examples of listening activities? One reason is that the teaching of listening usually consists of general strategies woven throughout the day and integrated with the curriculum. The daily schedule, for example, does not have a particular time slot devoted to listening; and when teachers do teach children to listen, it is usually part of doing something else. Some specific ideas for using listening activities throughout the day are described in "Activities to Encourage Active Listening in Young Children" (on pages 34–35).

### **Do I appreciate the connection between listening and literacy?**

Listening is a way of learning. As popular wisdom would have it, we "listen and learn." Electrophysiological responses of infants' brains to the language they hear are correlated with later language and reading ability during childhood (Lyytinen et al. 1999; Molfese 1999). When children are silent but attentive, it is common to speak of them as "taking it all in." Linguists would put it somewhat differently, saying that young children need "meaningful aural input" (they need to hear language) in order to master language. A child may remain silent during songs or stories or finger plays, for example, then suddenly be able to participate with great enthusiasm.

## **What We Know, What We Want to Know, and What We Learned about Martin Luther King Jr.**

### **What We Know**

"He did what was good."  
"He had two children."  
"He was brown."  
"He tried to set people free."

### **What We Want to Know**

"How old was he?"  
"Why did White people think that Black people were not like them?"  
"How did he do it?"  
"Why did some people dislike him?"  
"What was his children's names?"  
"How was he shot?"  
"Why did he get his own church?"

### **What We Learned**

"I learned about segregation and injustice."  
"Martin fought by his heart."  
"He did not use weapons because he was peaceful."  
"He felt bad inside when he was little."  
"He helped Black people to feel free."  
"Every person should be treated equal and fair."  
"People together can be stronger than a gun."





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We know that, for children without hearing impairments, listening is the foundation for speaking, reading, and writing (Jalongo 1995, 2003). When young children really listen to a story read aloud, they are thinking along with it. Their questions ("Why can't he get out of there?" "Is her mama coming back?") reveal that there is a cognitive aspect to listening. Familiarity with the sound system of language (phonology) exerts a powerful, positive influence on learning to read (Tabors & Snow 2001). Difficulties with listening comprehension usually correlate with difficulties in reading comprehension. From a language arts perspective, learning to listen and learning to read actually have much in common, in that listening and reading are both receptive language arts. Additionally, listening is the logical place to begin reading instruction, because beginning with listening respects and builds upon all of the language learning that the diverse groups of children in our early childhood programs bring with them.

## Conclusion

Of all the skills that teachers teach young children, listening is one of the most useful, both in and out of school. For young children to become good listeners, they need adults who communicate effectively, teachers who understand and teach to the unique characteristics of young children as listeners, and regular practice with developmentally appropriate and effective listening strategies. Listening does more than contribute to

children's success in school, as important as that is. "Listening is one of the primary methods by which children acquire the beliefs, norms, and knowledge bases of their society" (McDevitt 1990, 571). When teachers build upon young children's listening skills, they make an important contribution that will serve the children well, during early childhood and throughout their lives.

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**For children without hearing impairments, listening is the foundation for speaking, reading, and writing.**



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## Your Child Can Be a Better Listener! Here's How

**Start early**—Give your infant something good to listen to. Even though an infant cannot talk, a newborn baby can listen and respond to the tone of your voice, to a lullaby, and to lively music.

**Be a good example**—Give undivided attention to your child whenever possible. When she talks, stop what you are doing and really listen. Remember, parents who listen get children who listen.

**Take the time**—Set up a special time for conversation, such as mealtime or bedtime. Follow the child's lead in the discussion, and try to discover how he looks at things rather than your quizzing him.

**Help your child to focus**—Get your child's attention before you start to talk to her. Point out what is most important about what you are about to say, so she can listen for the main ideas.

**Give good directions**—Use a normal, quiet voice to help your child feel calm and confident. Give short, clear, simple instructions. If your child seems confused, break down directions into one step at a time.

**Read stories aloud**—Use community resources such as the public library for books to read and other story-listening opportunities. A good story is the best way to motivate children to pay attention to what they hear.

**Give varied experiences**—Give your child experiences that involve primarily listening, such as music, conversation, family stories, poems, and rhymes. Young children watch television an average of four to six hours a day; television viewing involves primarily watching, not listening.

**Get them ready**—Keep your child physically and emotionally ready to be a good listener at home and at school. Children who are tired, hungry, or upset cannot listen well.

Source: Adapted from Garman & Garman 1992; Konecki 1992



# Activities to Encourage Active Listening in Young Children

Here are some suggestions for weaving listening throughout the day

**Storytelling with props**—Read a story such as “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” until children become familiar with it. Then invite them to tell it using props, such as three sizes of teddy bears, three sizes of bowls, three pieces of cloth (to represent beds), and three sizes of blocks for chairs. Puppets, simple costumes, and flannel board cutouts also give children a chance to demonstrate their listening comprehension. Consider making prop boxes—collections of items that children can use to dramatize a story (Isenberg & Jalongo 2000).

**Co-playing**—Enter into children’s dramatic play when they have difficulty getting started or seem to be losing interest. You can stimulate children’s creative listening by taking on a story character’s persona (“I’m Curious George”); using an object symbolically (“We can use this cardboard tube for a firefighter’s hose”); incorporating new vocabulary (“How do I make an appointment for my sick dog in this veterinarian’s office?”); making suggestions (“If Mark

and D’nesha are going to speed around on those bikes and you’re the police officer, you might want to write some tickets or put out some traffic signs for them to obey”); or asking questions (“I’m a very hungry customer. What can you get to eat at this restaurant?”). Co-playing gives teachers a chance to assess children’s listening in a different context.

**Shared book experience**—Choose a predictable book to start, one that uses repetition, rhythm, rhyme, or patterns (such as the days of the week, numbers 1–10, a familiar song), in order to support beginning readers’ efforts to master the text. Rather than simply reading aloud, invite the children to make predictions about the book based on its cover illustration; then list these predictions, along with the name of the child who contributed each one. As you read the story aloud, pause to focus the children’s listening (“It looks like the hen might be in trouble now—let’s see what happens after she meets the wolf”). After the children have heard the story twice, invite

them to show that they have been listening by joining in during the reading. Follow the experience with extension activities that assess children’s listening—for example, children can arrange pictures from the story in correct sequence on a clothesline, listen to a tape of the story with a copy of the book, read with a partner, or create their own big book versions of the story in cooperative learning groups.

**Show and ask**—Ask children to bring in an interesting, inexpensive object to share with the class. Encourage active listening by inviting the other children to ask questions—things that they are curious about. When a four-year-old brought in a large plastic dinosaur, for example, children whose teacher had modeled and emphasized good questions asked, “Can we pass it around?” “Do its legs move?” “Where did you get it?” “Do you have more of them?”



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**Special requests**—Invite children to share a story, song, chant, or finger play that is new to the group. A first-grader might sing her father's favorite song, "Take Me Out to the Ballgame," and a kindergarten child might share a chant that she learned in religion class. These experiences encourage children to listen to one another and the teacher to listen to each child's contribution.

**Interviews**—Provide opportunities for children to practice listening to different speakers. Some ways to get them actively involved are to invite familiar school personnel such as the secretary or janitor to the classroom to talk about the work they do; ask parents to visit the classroom with their favorite toy from childhood so that children (and parents) can realize the importance of play in our lives; ask seniors who have a special skill (such as quilting) to demonstrate it for the children; invite community members to share a simple recipe or food from their culture; get high school or college students in the band to come, play their instruments, and tell about them. Follow each of these interviews with a group story about what the children learned from listening.

**Recorded books**—Support the listening needs of diverse language learners with technology, ranging from low tech to high tech:

- audiobooks—combinations of book/record, book/cassette, or book/CD
- books that are read aloud via computer software
- videotapes or DVDs
- digital audiobooks—downloadable MP3 format files, commonly referred to as "A-books" (Minkel 2000).

These recorded versions of books can become part of a classroom lending library and provide children with needed practice in matching the language they hear to the print they see. When choosing recorded books, select high-quality materials; look for something more than mere drill and repetition. If children are learning to read using audiobooks, the rate of speech on the recording needs to be slowed down, so they do not get frustrated. Choose recordings that are specifically designed for readers to follow along.



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They typically include an audible signal that reminds children when to turn the page; beginning readers rely on this signal to keep their place in the text.

**Captioned videos**—Provide captioned videos, a major breakthrough for children with hearing impairments or for second-language learners. As the people in the video speak, the words they say appear as text at the bottom of the screen. This enables a child who cannot hear the dialogue to read and understand it. For second-language learners, when the spoken dialogue is in the child's first language and the text captions are in the new language, this instant translation can support the child in making sense out of the second language.

**Disks, CDs, and DVDs**—Give children practice with letters, sounds, spelling, vocabulary drawing and writing, keyboarding, and second-language acquisition with software programs on disk, CD, or DVD. Often these programs feature characters and stories from children's literature or television series.

Source: Jalongo 1995, 2003