

The communication Stop

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Learning Language

Developing your child's listening and attention skills

Why is it so important?

Much of what a child learns before they go to school is from what they see around them, what you say to them and what you teach them. If they do not learn to look, take notice of and listen to the grown-ups and other children around them they are missing precious learning opportunities.

Increasingly children are going into school with poor listening and attention skills and, as a result, delayed language development. They struggle to listen to and learn from their teachers and they struggle to interact with other children their age who have already developed those skills.

Thankfully developing listening and attention skills can be fun using dedicated tasks such as reading a story to your child or playing a simple game. It can also be done during everyday tasks if your child takes part. I will give you examples of each to get you started.

- ***Developing attention skills***

Attention skills are a little different to listening skills as you do not have to be listening, to be paying attention. I focus on 'looking' at this stage. In it's simplest form you can develop a young child's attention by smiling at them and giving them eye contact. When they look back and smile make a silly noise or funny face to continue that interaction.

A slightly older child can sit with a parent and roll a ball between them. 'Peek a boo' is another game that develops attention skills. Looking at pictures together is another way to develop these skills.

You add the element of listening and language development when you name picture objects while looking at 'early stage books.' If your child points to a picture name it for them. If a detailed picture, talk about what is happening. Looking at busy pictures is a way to develop visual focus and the ability to see information within pictures. Listening and attention skills are interlinked and can be developed alongside each other.

Older children

Just remember that developing your child's visual skills is an important stage in their development. I have a lovely 'look and find' lotto game which is great for developing skills in this area. There are now lots of 'look and find books' out there and simple spot the difference books that are great for developing your child's ability to look and pick out detail. These are important building block skills for your child's development and will all contribute to developing attention skills.

I also have a shape sorter activity and I have used the pieces in a barrier type activity. This is a really useful resource as I have 2 sets of every piece. I place a number of pieces (I started with 3) in a line I show them briefly before covering them up and ask the child to copy the

shapes I have used. I made this task and many others more fun by asking the child who is taking their turn to sit in the 'hot seat'. They found this really exciting and it showed the others, who were waiting, they could not call out etc as it was not their turn.

- ***Develop listening skills***

You need to complete tasks that require your child to listen to something and then respond.

For example very young children can use the books with buttons which they press for noises. Even if your child is not able to listen to the simple story at first, teach them what each picture represents and ask them to push one, naming the picture. If they get it wrong, push it for them and tell them again which one it is. Then repeat.

If your child is older and above this level read them a story. After each page, stop and ask them a question about what happened on the page you just read. Children love to do this and it teaches them a very valuable skill before they start to read. They learn to think about what is read rather than let the words wash over them. You cannot learn from what you read if you do not consider the meaning of the words you read. Some children really struggle with this later on so start to develop this skill while developing your child's active listening skills.

Games that work well are simple board games. I really like orchard toys as their games are language rich and offer great opportunities to develop vocabulary knowledge as well as motivate children to listen and pay attention. (They are also very reasonably priced too and can be found at reduced prices in stores such as ALDI and on ebay).

Name and repeat the items on the boards before you ask your child to choose their board. You have their attention while they anticipate playing the game and then you can repeat the vocabulary throughout the game. We can get bored of repetition, but children like it and need it to learn. If you were learning a language would you remember what was said if you only heard the word one time? I certainly wouldn't. Once the game is played I always ask the child/children to give me back the pictures on their board. I choose which one I want them to give me which means they have to listen and I get a chance to review what they have learnt by seeing if they know which picture to give me. Children can learn and know words before they may have the confidence to say them.

Singing and learning nursery rhymes is another way to develop listening and attention skills and for older children use other songs they might like. Some children's programmes have dance routines that accompany these songs and are good for attention development. You have to watch well to remember and learn them.

Older children

I use games such as Orchard Toys shopping list and ask children to find certain pictures from the shopping lists I am holding. Have the pictures face upwards so they are not too difficult to find. This is about developing listening and attention skills, not memory skills (I do use the same game, in the same way, with the pictures face down to develop use of 'repetition' to aid auditory memory in KS2 children).

Use the environment and ask you child to move around and complete 2 tasks e.g. read the word on the monster poster and touch the door then come and sit back down. Then try 3 etc. Let them instruct you too. All children like to take on the teacher/ instructor role.

Ask your child to complete some actions, start with 1 then increase to 2 then 3 if possible. Let them ask you do the same as they will enjoy being in charge. Sometimes get it wrong and ask them if you did it ok. They will enjoy correcting you and it will help to keep their focus.

Musical instruments are also a good way to develop listening skills. If you have a number of instruments line them up on a small table, ask your child to turn their back, then play one instrument briefly. Then ask your child to tell you which one you used. If correct, take another turn. If not show them which one you used so they may recognise the sound in the future.

Once they are correct consistently with one sound use 2 and see if they can identify which ones and in what order. This will give you a chance to reinforce the concepts 'first/next' as well. Once the activity is established and your child knows what to do allow them to take a turn to be on and for you to guess. Remember your child will love it if you occasionally get it wrong.

I also use a simple coloured instrument to play different notes to a child who is watching and ask them to copy what I have done. As I play each note they can recall the colour or the sound to help them remember. Start really simply with 2 notes and build up with success.

Simple games such as 'I went to the market and bought....' are also effective. Take turns to add an item after you have repeated those already said.

You could do alternative funny versions such as 'I'm so hungry I could eat..... or

'The witch made a spell using.....'

During everyday tasks you can ask your child to help you shop by giving them a task.

e.g. Can you find the apples, where are the apples?

Can you find the big oranges? Can you get 4 big oranges for mummy?

Let's find pasta for dinner. Which pasta shall we get? Help daddy choose.

During tidy up tasks you can ask your child for certain items first.

e.g. Find the trains for mummy. Let's put the trains in the box first.

Find the pencils for daddy. Can you find the red pencil, now the blue pencil, and where is the green pencil. If they don't know their colours and don't respond, look for the pencil you named and say 'here it is, here's the red pencil, here's the blue pencil etc. This strategy can be used with any tidying up task.

If sorting out laundry can your child help you to put each person's clothing items on the correct pile.

e.g. This is daddy's top can you put that on daddy's pile. This is Jessica's jumper can you put that on Jessica's pile.

Developing your child's listening and attention skills help them to form the foundation skills they need for their future learning. They are vital but please remember to keep your activities fun. We all learn more if we have fun while learning.