

# Attention and Listening

Attention and listening are important skills within the foundation of communication development.

## Listening

Listening is the ability to filter between different noises that we hear, to 'tune in' to sounds that are important. This is not the same as hearing.

We will hear many different sounds around us within our environment, but we do not listen to them all. Often, we are able to 'tune out' sounds that we do not need to listen to, or can be ignored, for example, when walking in a park talking to a friend, you may be able to 'tune out' the noise of leaves rustling or birds singing, in order to focus on listening to their voice. Children need to learn to filter out sounds that are not needed, and to 'tune in' to sounds that are required.

Listening is an active process, which is key to effective communication.



## Attention

Attention is the ability to concentrate on one aspect of your surroundings, whilst ignoring other elements. It also involves the ability to listen for increasing periods of time.

Children can have varying levels of attention, from single channelled, to later stages where attention control is integrated. Children's activity levels fluctuate depending on the activity. If it is something they have chosen, they may well be able to attend for ages. However, less motivating activities chosen by someone else are going to be harder. You may also find that children are able to focus better in a 1:1 situation, or with an adult, compared to when within a group of other children.

If children struggle with listening and attention skills, it may impact upon their ability to develop and extend their play, join in with others, develop language, and to engage in learning opportunities.

## Activities to develop attention and listening

### Listening Walks

Take children to different areas around the nursery/preschool setting e.g. the hall, the corridor, the playground. Talk about the different noises that they can hear. Try getting the children to close their eyes and point to the direction a sound is coming from.

### Ready, Steady, Go

Play games that require the child to listen for 'go' before the game/action continues. This may include, knocking down a tower, rolling a ball, pushing a car down a track, playing musical instruments, and chasing games.

## Nursery rhymes and action songs

Sing familiar or repetitive songs where the child must listen to follow actions involved e.g. wheels on the bus, head, shoulders, knees and toes. You may choose to sing these in different ways e.g. quietly, loudly, fast, slow, to vary whether the child is paying attention and listening to the changes.

## Musical Instruments

Encourage the child to copy rhythm patterns that you create, or playing the instruments in different ways e.g. quietly, loudly, fast, slow. You can also play a hidden instrument and get the child to point to a picture of the instrument they think they heard.

## Simon Says

Simon says can be played with a group of children, initially following all of the instructions given, and then introducing the 'Simon Says' element. Children must listen out for 'Simon Says', in order to complete the instruction.

## Attention Autism

**Attention Autism is an intervention model designed by Gina Davies, Specialist Speech and Language Therapist.** Attention Autism aims to develop natural and spontaneous communication through the use of visually based and highly motivating activities. Whilst this program was initially created for children on the Autism Spectrum, it is beneficial for any child with attention or communication difficulties.

### Stages of Attention Autism

The Attention Autism programme progresses through a series of stages, building on each skill level. Each new stage is introduced when the group is ready to expand attention skills. Gina Davis' primary objective is that the sessions are fun and "offer an irresistible invitation to learn"! Attention Autism principles can then be generalised to curriculum activities (e.g. literacy and numeracy) to facilitate learning and skill development.

- **Stage 1: The Bucket to Focus Attention.**  
A bucket is filled with visually engaging objects and toys, aiming to gain the shared attention of the group. The adult leader shows each item to the group and uses simple repetitive vocabulary to comment on the various objects.
- **Stage 2: The Attention Builder.**  
Visually stimulating activities are shown to the group by the adult leader, aiming to sustain attention for a longer period. The activities are fun, visually engaging and can often involve delightful mess!
- **Stage 3: Turn taking & Re-engaging Attention.**  
The adult leader demonstrates a simple activity, often modelled with another adult in the group. Some children are then invited to have a turn but only if they are comfortable to do so. Not every child in the group will get a turn, which then teaches important emotional regulation skills, as well as the essential skills of waiting, turn-taking and learning through modelling.
- **Stage 4: Shifting & Re-engaging Attention.**  
Stage 4 aims to develop the skill of engaging and shifting attention. The adult leader demonstrates a simple creative task, and then gives each child an individual kit to copy the task. The children take their kits to a table, complete the task independently, and then everyone returns to the group to show their completed tasks.

## Further Resources

Please see <http://ginadavies.co.uk/parents-services/professional-shop/> for further information, and training courses. She can also be found on Facebook, and YouTube for video examples as 'Gina Davies Autism Centre.' <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPPw71j3k2Zhe19Fb3CO-ag>



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## Strategies to use in the setting

### Reducing distractions

There are several factors within the child's environment that can be distracting and can make it difficult for children to focus their attention. Aim to minimise these, to create an environment where it is easier to attend and listen to the setting learning.

- Reduce background noise. Some children may need a quiet area to work for focused working.
- Consider seating. Some children may attend better closer to the adult who is speaking. If sitting by a window, children may be distracted by birds or rain or other children outside, whilst sitting near the door, children may be distracted by the noise from other classes or children in the corridor.
- Consider the lighting. There may be a flickering computer screen, a faulty flickering light, or the light may be reflecting on a white board, which can be distracting. Try to avoid talking to children with the light behind you, as this makes it more difficult to see your face.

### Supporting Attention within the setting

- Call the child's name to gain their attention before giving an instruction or spoken information.
- Encourage the child to look at you when you talk to them, by getting down to their level. This does not necessarily mean eye-contact. For some children, having to make eye-contact can be too overwhelming, and may prevent them being able to focus and listen.
- Use your voice, facial expression, and gestures to keep their interest. Using an animated voice can make words sound interesting and keep a child's interest for longer.
- Use simple sentences and emphasise key words.
- Build joint attention by joining activities that the child has chosen. Follow their lead and their interests, as these activities will likely sustain their attention for longer.
- Have realistic expectations of the child's attention. If they currently attend for around 2 minutes, you cannot expect them to attend an activity for 10. Start where they are at, and gradually build activity length to increase their attention.
- Allow children suitable learning and/or movement breaks.
- Vary the activity to maintain attention – alternate listening with doing. As a rule, don't expect children to sustain listening for more than 10 minutes, without doing, thinking or talking about something so that they are actively involved in the learning.
- Use visual support to provide clear guidelines of what is expected. Set clear and achievable expectations for each task in the setting.
- Use visual timetables to demonstrate the structure of the day. This can be used at home and at nursery/preschool. Reinforce this by referring back to it throughout the day and encourage children to make independent use of this to remind them what is coming next in the day.
- Use individualised task planners to break down tasks with multiple steps. Use a visual representation of each step in the task to help the child remember what comes next. Encourage the child to refer back to the planner when they lose focus or forget the next step. They can tick or rub off each step as they complete it to begin to encourage their independence.
- Use visual/auditory timers to show how long a task needs to be done for before moving on to another task.