

Information leaflet for Parents/ Carers

Communication Tips



This information leaflet contains a range of tips to help parents and carers communicate better with a child who has difficulty hearing or listening. This information may also be useful for teachers and other professionals involved with the child.

Tips for good communication

Some children may have a mild or changing hearing loss while others may have normal hearing but still have problems with listening and understanding conversation in certain situations. You can make things easier for your child by making some simple changes to their listening environment, and improve their listening skills by playing listening or memory games and tasks.

1. When speaking, first attract your child's attention by calling his/her name or by touch.
2. Avoid having an important conversation with your child in a room with hard surfaces, like a kitchen, because hard surfaces create echoes, making it more difficult to hear. If it is possible, choose a room with soft furnishings and carpet, such as a sitting room.
3. Cut down background noise – turn down any music and the television when you are talking to your child. Avoid speaking to your child against background chatter.
4. If possible, talk face to face, sitting or bending to the same level as your child. Try to have light on your face and avoid standing in front of a window which makes lip reading difficult.
5. Speak up and speak clearly, but don't shout. Be direct, keeping requests short and simple. Try to give visual or spoken clues if you are changing to a new topic.

6. When talking with your child, check that they are listening and watching. Check as you go along that they have understood by asking them to repeat what has been said.
7. Tell your child's teacher. Ask them to move your child to the front of the class, reduce background noise and check that your child has heard.
8. Children with poor hearing, listening or speech may find it difficult to pick up information at nursery or school. You can help by spending extra time with your child at home talking together, or going over some of their lessons to check they have understood what they did in class.
9. Remember, children with hearing or listening problems may feel frustrated and left out. This can lead to behaviour that seems naughty. Try to understand and deal with the cause of the problem first. If your child has not done something they were asked to do, check that they have heard your initial instruction.

What is listening?

Listening and hearing are two different things.

- Hearing is simply the ability to detect or pick up sounds.
- Listening involves actively giving your attention to sounds. It involves concentrating on sounds and making sense of what we hear. Listening is therefore something that we choose to do. It is a skill that we lose or improve with practice.

Our ability to listen can be influenced by several factors. See if any of the factors below apply to your child and tick the ones that do. Once you've identified which factors may have an effect on your child's listening, see if you can apply the

suggested changes. Do this exercise with your child as it can be helpful for them to understand why they sometimes don't hear/listen.

Factors affecting listening:

Motivation: If your child doesn't have a reason to listen then they are less likely to. When encouraging your child to listen, try to explain why it is important or what will happen if they don't. Use reward charts, praise or other incentives to reward your child for good listening.

Interest: We all pay attention to the things that interest us. Unfortunately, we can also 'switch off' when we are no longer interested. It is important to be aware of your child's body language and behaviour as this will give you a clue as to when they are losing interest e.g. they become fidgety, start looking around or messing with clothing or objects. If this happens, ask them a question or ask for their opinion so keep them interested in the conversation.

Length of conversation: After a while, the effort of concentration can become very tiring for your child and they may 'switch off'. Ensure that the important information is said at the start of a conversation or break the information into short chunks.

Loudness: If a voice is so quiet that we have to strain to hear, we soon stop trying as it takes more effort to listen. Make sure that you speak to your child in a clear voice at a volume that can be easily heard, this volume will be different depending on whether there is any other noise in the same room. Your child may prefer the television on louder than necessary as a higher volume tends to mean less concentration is needed, especially if there are distractions such as other people in the room.

Feelings of failure: If your child doesn't have much confidence in their hearing or listening they may not bother to try to listen as they think that they won't be able to. This is most common when several people are talking or when there is background noise, you might notice that your child has withdrawn from the conversation e.g. stopped listening. To help your child feel more confident in these situations try to help them to join in by asking them a question, asking for their opinion about whatever is being discussed or summarising what has been said to keep them involved. If they ask for something to be repeated, rather than repeating everything, ask them to tell you what they have heard and then fill in the gaps.

Distractions: Distractions can be things to look at, things to mess with or things to listen to that distract your child from what they are meant to be listening to. Be aware of distractions when you are talking to your child, try to go somewhere quiet and at school, they are less likely to be distracted if they sit at the front of the class.

Family attitudes: Some families are noisier and more chaotic than others and some are better at communication than others. Think about how your family talk to each other and how this affects your child. You may need to apply 'house rules' such as taking turns to speak, listening to each other, not interrupting and having family conversations in a quieter environment e.g. around the dinner table rather than in front of the television. The bottom of the stairs is normally a good place for important conversations as it's often quiet with fewer distractions. For older children, using a mobile phone to attract attention rather than shouting upstairs can be effective.

Habit of not listening: If your child has struggled to hear in the past or still has difficulties, not listening or 'switching off' may become a habit. They may find themselves day dreaming, thinking, or looking at something else rather than focusing on the person speaking. If you are aware that your child does this, then asking regular questions or asking your child's opinion can help to keep them focused.

Physical health: Your child's general health and well-being can affect their ability to concentrate. Tiredness, pain or stress can all make concentrating and listening harder and they may be more likely to 'switch off'. Make sure your child gets plenty of sleep and avoid long or important conversations when your child is tired or stressed.

Listening games

Listening games need to be relevant to your child's difficulties, for example:

- If they have problems remembering or recalling instructions, choose a memory game;
- If they have problems listening with background noise, choose a listening game using an un-tuned radio, music or noisy environment as the distraction. General noise is easier to 'ignore' than other voices;
- If they have problems with focus or concentration, choose a listening game with no distraction.

The games need to be played each day if possible for about 15-20 minutes. Try to build the games into family life, including friends or siblings where possible. The games need to be appropriate for your child's age and interests. Remember that 'listening' is affected by interest and motivation! The suggestions below are just ideas; don't be frightened to develop your own.

The games should be at a level that is achievable but slightly challenging. Over several weeks, slowly increase the difficulty of the game so that they stay fun but are challenging. Anything that improves your child's attention span will help their listening ability.

Examples of listening games

Shared reading: choose a book at your child's level or slightly above and take it in turns to read a page. Try to use interesting and clear voices. Try retelling the story, discuss the story and ask questions.

Sometimes, try reading with a little background noise (not television). Introduce low levels of background noise so that your child can practice picking out your voice from other voices.

Sound location games: get your child to close their eyes and see if they can locate or track different sounds e.g. 'blind man's bluff' or point to the sound.

Musical chairs or statues will help your child listen to changes and gaps in music. This will encourage your child to notice pauses, rhythm and tone in voices.

Fill small containers with items that make different sounds such as sand, pasta or coins. Draw a picture of the item on a card, and then shake each container. Get your child to use the cards to show which item it is.

Copy that tune: ask your child to repeat simple tapped tunes using a drum, xylophone or just pots and pans. Encourage them to copy the rhythm and the volume of the tune.

Encourage your child to listen to audio books (available from libraries) in quiet or with background noise. To make this very challenging, listen to the book through one earpiece whilst listening to the radio through the other ear.

Pass on the message (Chinese whispers): first in quiet, then introduce background noise and other distractions. Increase the complexity of the “message” gradually.

Encourage your child to try music or dance lessons.

Examples of memory games:

‘Simon says’: start with one or two instructions then increase the complexity e.g. stand up, put hands in the air and jump on the spot.

Copy that tune: ask your child to repeat simple tapped tunes using a drum, xylophone or just pots and pans. Encourage them to copy the rhythm and the volume of the tune.

‘I went to the shops and bought’: take it in turns to recall the things that other ‘players’ have said then add your own. To make it easier, choose a subject area e.g. fruit shop, or a letter of the alphabet that all things begin with.

Instructions during general play:

1. Use bricks, animals, cars, coloured buttons etc, instructing your child to put them in order of colours or type;
2. Use plasticine e.g. instructing your child to make brown sausages, green peas and orange carrots;
3. Play shops – encourage your child to fetch certain things from around the house. Choose similar things to keep it

simple e.g. from the same room and increase the range and number of items to make it harder;

4. Dress the doll, instructing your child on what to dress the doll in.

Circuits: at the park give a circuit that your child has to complete e.g. swings to slide to goalpost and back. Time how long it takes as an incentive or to increase their motivation.

Object hide and seek: hide a treat then give your child instructions as to where it is hidden.

Pass on the message (Chinese whispers): first in quiet, then introduce background noise and other distractions. Increase the complexity of the 'message' gradually.

Apps and brain training games: older children may be more receptive/likely to respond/responsive to electronic interaction than interaction with their parents/carers!

Further Information

We hope this information leaflet will help your child to listen and communicate better and give you, teachers and other family members some tips to help your child.

This leaflet was produced using the latest evidence available. Further details are available upon request.

If you have any further concerns or questions or would like more information please contact your GP (family doctor) or other school or health [medical] professional and request a referral for assessment at:

Audiology Department
Birmingham Children's Hospital
Steelhouse Lane
B4 6NH

Tel: 0121 333 9360

Email: audiology@audiology.bch.uk

Health Information and Internet access is also available from the Family Health Information Centre at the hospital.

Tel: 0121 333 8505

Email: child.infoctr@bch.nhs.uk

Looking after and sharing information about your child

We have a duty of care to help patients and families understand how information about them is kept and shared and we include the following information in all our patient leaflets:

Information is collected about patients relevant to their diagnosis, treatment and care. We store it in written records and electronically on computer. As a necessary part of that care and treatment we may have to share some patient information with other people and organisations who are either responsible or directly involved in the patient's care. This may involve taking the patient's information off site. We may also have to share some information for other purposes; such as research etc. Any information that is shared in this way will not identify the patient unless we have the patient's and parent's/carer's consent. If you have any questions and/or do not want us to share that information with others, please talk to the people looking after your child or contact PALS (Patient Advice and Liaison Service) on 0121 333 8403.

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