Attention and Listening Skills

Introduction

Attention and listening skills are the foundations to learning language. Supporting attention and listening skills will provide children with the best environment to develop their understanding and use of language.

Some children find listening really difficult. This may be due to:

- A medical disorder like ADHD
- Hearing loss or previous problems with hearing like glue ear
- Difficulties understanding language e.g. it's too complex/long
- It takes time for them to process language
- Environmental factors e.g. background noise, visual distractions
- The speakers voice is too quiet/too fast

Children with long-standing comprehension difficulties get used to not understanding and may guess at answers or change the subject so that they don’t ‘fail’. They may expect to be wrong and wait to be corrected. They may become passive listeners.

Children need to know that not speaking doesn’t necessarily mean that they are listening!

Children need to be taught the ‘rules’ of good listening, i.e. sit still, look at the speaker and think about the words. The Language Link website provides Good Talking Pictures to support training of good listening ‘rules’.

Role play with another adult, can be used to support a child's understanding of good listening rules. When a child recognises the behaviour in others, it will help them to recognise the behaviour in themselves and so change it.
General classroom strategies to support attention and listening skills

- Sit the child near the front and make frequent eye contact
- Before making an announcement to the whole class, gain their attention by tapping a board/clapping/ ringing a small bell/using a shaker. Make sure that the class know that this is their signal to stop, look at the teacher, and get ready to listen
- Use the child’s name to get their attention before you talk to them
- Regain the child’s attention by casually mentioning his/her name while you are talking to the whole class
- Sit the child where there are few distractions such as away from windows, corridors, computer screens, etc.
- Use visual support such as flash cards, pictures or objects while you are talking as children find it easier to concentrate on visual things
- Keep instructions as short as possible. Break them into small steps and give one at a time.
- Tell child what he/she is to listen out for.
- Have a ‘special’ place for the child to sit during carpet time, maybe their own carpet ‘square’ or cushion.
- Give the child something to hold for you during group tasks, for example word cards.
- Give a synopsis of what is to come, ‘this is about a girl who...’
- Use the cue cards from Language Link to describe good listening, and put them where children can see them and refer to them.
- Praise children who are following the good listening rules e.g. “Well done Ben for doing good sitting”, “I can see that Amita is doing good looking at me”
- Ensure that the task has been understood by asking the child what they have to do following the instruction.

Activities for use with individuals or small groups

Listening for a length of time requires practise. The following activities are designed to improve attention and listening skills.

- Act out actions to songs and finger rhymes together
- Play ‘Simon Says’.
- Play ‘Where’s the clock?’ Hide a ticking clock (or some other item that makes a quiet noise). Can the children locate the item?
- Play the “Bear and the Honey Pot”. One child sits blindfolded in the middle with a bunch of keys in front of them. The adult points to one of the children sitting around the edge, and that child has to try to get the keys without “the bear” hearing them. “The bear” has to listen carefully, and points when he/she hears a noise.
- Play sound lotto with a tape of sounds and matching pictures. (Commercial versions of this game can be bought.)
- Make a set of shakers using plastic bottles. Each shaker contains something different, e.g. pebbles, pasta, peas, buttons. The child is blindfolded or turns his/her back and a sound is made with one of the shakers. Can he/she identify which one it was?
• Ask the child to copy a simple rhythm using clapping or simple instruments
• Play barrier games with musical instruments. Place behind a screen a set of musical instruments that have already been looked at, listened to and named by the children. Make a noise behind the screen with one of the instruments and the children have to guess the instrument.
• Recognising voices. Can the child identify familiar voices on tape? Can they match the voice to a photo?
• Play listening and remembering games, e.g. variations on 'I went to the shops and bought….' “I went on holiday and I packed…”
• Place a number of pictures on the table, e.g. pictures of farm animals. Give each child a different picture name (e.g. a different animal name). Tell a story mentioning the pictures by name. When a child’s picture is named they raise their hand or point to the picture or make a noise.
• Play Spot the Mistake. Children listen to sentences/rhymes with deliberate mistakes. Can they identify and correct the mistake? e.g. Baa, baa, black pig.
• Zoo Game – Children sit in a circle with enough room outside the circle for them to run around. Give each child a different toy zoo animal (e.g. zebra, elephant etc.) Tell a story about a trip to the zoo. Each time they hear their animal mentioned they have to get up and run around the outside of the circle and back to their place. When the word Zoo is heard all the children get up and run around. This game is good for developing attention and listening skills, concentration and memory skills as they have to remember their animal.

Possible Resources

• Junior Language Link resources (resources within Infant Language Link may also be appropriate to adapt)
• Sound lotto game e.g. Orchard toys Cock-a-doodle-moo, Soundtracks
• Musical instruments
• Speechmark: Speaking, Listening and Understanding: Games for Young Children