

## Listening and Teaching Practices

By Sophie Garceau

To explain listening I like to use the analogy that listening is to hearing what looking is to seeing. Both listening and looking require a zoom, whether auditory or visual, which enables a person to take in relevant information while also tuning out irrelevant information. Listening is too often regarded in our schools as simply the passive state of a child that enables the teacher to instruct and to be obeyed. This narrow perspective of listening presents the child as a passive receiver of information and fails to acknowledge that listening is active as it requires both attention span and interaction. Paul Madaule, who has been working in the field of listening training for more than two decades, links attention span and concentration to the same root skill - listening. He defines attention span as the “ability to listen (well) for a prolonged period of time; it is ‘listening plus time factor’” while “concentration, on the other hand, is the ability to cut out parasitic information in order to ‘listen to oneself thinking’.” Moreover, he argues “to help children maximize their attention span at school is to help them maximize their listening.”(1)

Unfortunately, the predominant teaching approach used in many classrooms does not favor the development of attention span, concentration and good listening skills. It is one in which activities are organized around the teacher’s agenda rather than that of the child. Activities such as the well known “Show and Tell” and “Circle Time”, for example, are used with the intention of developing the language and listening skills of young children. However, while these two activities may challenge language and listening skills, they do not actually develop and train these skills. These type of activities require the child to sit quietly, refrain from bothering others and to speak only when asked -behaviors which can only be displayed once other developmental milestones have been reached that permit good sensory integration and motor planning, precisely the skills which the young child is in the process of training during this period of his or her educational life.

As opposed to this “teacher dominion approach”(2) noted above, teaching approaches which favor developmentally appropriate practices, where the child and not the teacher sets the agenda, are more likely to enhance the development of good listening skills. Developmentally appropriate practices seem to provide a “listening-friendly” environment since holistic learning, power sharing and two-way communication are encouraged. Children are never passive receivers. Classrooms designed, for example, to enable the child to choose among a variety of activities, including both individual and group activities, facilitate a greater degree of interaction and communication. Children’s actions and talk (rather than the teacher’s agenda of themes and time) become the source of ideas for teachers’ planning. Flexible curriculums, which help to integrate subjects, facilitate the learning of relevant information. When something is relevant and serves a purpose, it catches our attention and increases our motivation to “look at it” or “to listen to it” which, in turn, helps to develop our attention span and concentration and thus, to train listening.

The person with a listening difficulty is the one who daydreams, who is easily distractible, who doesn’t finish his work on time, who is fidgety on his chair, who chats with other children and who doesn’t show interest in the topic presented. He or she might misinterpret questions, need repetition, have a hard time with sequential instructions, have hesitant speech, tend to procrastinate, to fidget and/or to have poor reading skills. He or she might have been diagnosed with a learning disability, ADD, ADHD, PDD, autism, poor central auditory processing, language learning impairment or a general developmental delay. Poor listening is a common denominator to many of these children who do not do well

at school. We cannot teach someone to listen (as the teacher dominion approach might indicate) just as we cannot teach someone to be spontaneous. Similarly, we cannot administer drugs, such as Ritalin, to children simply to make them more “manageable” in our large classrooms so that they fit in with our traditional teaching approaches. As educators we can, however, assist the training and development of listening with time and through relevant experiences and by moving toward developmentally appropriate and holistic teaching practices.

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