

Listening – so much more than *hearing*

Desley Jones



Desley is Director of Ballymore Kindergarten and Preschool. She has over 24 years experience in both community kindergartens and state preschools including a number of years as a Preschool Advisory Teacher.

Desley has a Diploma of Teaching in Early Childhood, a Bachelor of Education and has recently completed an Honours Degree in Psychology. In addition to teaching fulltime, Desley has collaborated with a psychologist to write a social skills program for children experiencing difficulties in social interactions, including children with ASD and Asperger's. Desley is a 2011 recipient of a NEiTA ASG Inspirational Teaching State and Territory Award.

The importance of relationships to a child's learning and development are cornerstones of the *Early Years Learning Framework*. When reflecting on children's relationships, with peers or teachers, it is apparent that healthy relationships are based on effective communication; and possibly the most crucial aspect of communication is the ability to listen. Virtually all of our daily interactions in the school, or social milieu, rely on listening and responding to others. Helping children to develop this skill, however, is not simple. Understanding the complexities of what is involved in attending to another person and their message has the potential to change our approach to working with young children in this fundamental area.

More than simply listening

The process of listening involves several areas of development and includes hearing, awareness of others, self-control, processing ability and sustained focus together with confidence and the language ability to respond. We ask a lot of young children when we ask them to *listen*. Helping children to develop this skill requires adults to invest time, patience, support and guidance.

Hearing is essential for *listening*, but it is not the whole story. Also required is the ability to notice that someone is speaking to you, attending to what the speaker is saying, processing what is heard and responding. Talking about the need to *listen* is an important first step. Discussing

why we listen, what would happen if we didn't listen and when we have to listen will help children to understand the reasoning behind the request. Listening needs to take place in group sessions as well as between children, peers and teachers throughout the day. Highlighting the important role of listening in being part of a group will set the scene for a listening environment.

Awareness of others

The awareness that someone is speaking to them takes time for children to develop and is not just reliant on children *hearing* the other person's voice. Young children need help to develop a consciousness of others. Participating in games that focus on interacting with others, having group discussions in a circle so that the *speaker* is visible to all *listeners*, and taking the time to direct children's attention to the person speaking to them are all necessary strategies (e.g. 'Matthew, I can see that Thomas is speaking to you. If you turn and look at him, you can listen really well.')

It is especially important to help children to develop a habit of responding to their name. Strategies such as saying their name once only, then either acknowledging their response or moving toward them and gaining their attention through touch, and stating, 'I'm glad you turned to look at me when I said your name. I know that will help you to listen to me,' are more productive than calling their name over and over.



The ability to listen is a crucial aspect of communication.

Self-control

Once children have become aware that they are being spoken to, they require the self-control to stop what they are doing and attend to what the other person is saying. For young children, engrossed in their own thoughts and activity, stopping to listen does not come easily. Teachers have an important role in directing children's attention and in describing what is happening, or what needs to happen and why, and in reinforcing positive behaviour 'Gen, thanks for stopping your painting to look at Debbie. She will know you are really trying to listen to her.'

Self-control is also required by the child to remember the rules of good listening – to keep their body still, to look at the speaker, to be quiet as they speak, to think about what they are saying. Self-control can be enhanced through many activities including music, yoga, breathing and relaxation exercises, or transition games that give specific directions to children to practise listening and responding to another person.

Establishing the idea that self-control, and listening in general, can be practised and improved, sets a positive scene in exercising skills. Talking about practice acknowledges that some things (e.g. looking at the person speaking) can be hard to do. It sends a message that this is something that we can get better at and incorporates an 'I can' attitude. It also provides space for the

celebration of small steps as children work towards achieving improved skills.

Thinking and problem solving

Processing ability is also needed to *think about what the other person is saying*. Rephrasing or reframing questions and comments for children may help them to interpret and process what is being said, and respond more easily. Decoding what another child has said into more manageable chunks may assist some children, as will the use of visual aids that encourage visualisation of what is being said.

Problem-solving activities provide practice in processing information and in communication, as do small group sharing or discussion sessions. During group times and in play, children should experience opportunities to practice basic problem solving strategies:

1. stating the problem
2. brainstorming possible solutions
3. selecting one to try
4. implementing, and
5. evaluating.

This will foster deeper-level thinking skills in young children as well as contributing to listening and communicating.

Reflecting with children (e.g. 'What does it mean when ...', 'I wonder what would happen if ...') as well as opportunities to recall and compare, will promote an environment of consideration, deliberation and pondering and set the scene for increasing awareness.

As in all areas of education, our teaching practice needs to take account of the individual differences within each group. As educators, being conscious of the expectations that we have of children, and adapting our teaching style to support individuals, models a listening approach to children and parents, and supports our acknowledgement of the complexities of relationships.