

Strategies to Grow Listening Skills:

Regardless of a child's needs, most children could use practice in listening. The world is moving at a fast pace around them and they are getting information from everywhere. Distractions abound in our world and there is more vying for our children's attention than ever before. Here are some tips to help your child be a more effective listener:

- 1. Get their attention before you start giving directions.** Connect with your child—make eye contact, put your hand on their shoulder, or hold their hand—then tell them what you want to say.
- 2. Repeating yourself means you didn't have their attention from the beginning.** Start again with gaining their attention.
- 3. Be direct.** Don't use extra words. Tell the child exactly what you need them to do. When we add words for affect, our message gets lost.
- 4. Affirm the child's point of view.** Acknowledge how the child might feel and then deliver the message.
- 5. Give choices when it's appropriate.** Instead of giving a list of directions, allow the child to choose what to do first. Instead of saying, "Please put your pajamas on, brush your teeth, and read your book," you could say, "Before we read, would you like to put your pajamas on or brush your teeth first?"
- 6. Model active listening.** Put your phone away, close your laptop screen, and make eye contact with your child when they speak to you. Modeling what you expect will make a big difference.

Still not listening?--More Strategies to Grow Listening Skills

Some children are more defiant and set in their ways than others. Maybe you tried implementing some of the effective listening strategies from the last newsletter and you've still not made any progress. Try the "First, Then" strategy if your child is still having trouble listening. This strategy pairs an expectation with something they prefer. For example, your child may want to play a video game, but also has to practice piano. You would say, "First you can practice piano, then, you can play your game." Pairing this strategy with a timer is effective. The preferred activity should be allowed for a shorter duration than the non-preferred activity. If the child is required to practice piano for 20 minutes a day, then the video game should be allowed for 20 minutes or less—alternating back to another less-preferred task. Expect some push back but stand your ground. The child may whine or pout about not getting to play video games immediately, but they will see that upon completion of the lesser preferred activity, they will get what they want.

If this strategy is lacking effectiveness, despite consistent implementation, try using this strategy with visuals and go non-verbal. Using the piano example, you would provide the child with a picture of a piano, followed by a picture of a video game. Making a laminated chart labeled "First, Then," with Velcro pictures can avoid engaging in power struggles with children. Point to the expectation, rather than using words, and avoid eye-contact to prevent escalation.

Lower, Slower, Fewer:

This strategy builds on the other strategies. When giving directions to our children we can increase our effectiveness when we are cognizant of how we use our words. The strategy is called “Lower, Slower, Less.” This one is pretty self-explanatory; it just requires you to be conscious of HOW you deliver the message.

Lower the volume of your words. This requires the child to calm themselves to enough to hear what you are saying. If there is other noise in the area, it requires the child to lean in and engage in active listening.

Speak the words more **slowly**. This allows the child to fully comprehend the message and emphasizes the importance of what is being said.

Use **fewer** words. Instead of saying, “I would really like it if you practiced the piano before you played video games because you have a lesson tomorrow. It will be important for you to be ready, and you won’t have time later because you have soccer practice tonight.” As parents, we are all guilty of this. However, we can increase our effectiveness by saying something like, “First, practice piano, then you can play video games.”

Using a Pause and a Whisper to Gain Attention:

Does it ever feel like your child isn’t listening? Do you find yourself giving directions more than once? Maybe this is because you didn’t have their attention when you gave the message the first time! If you think this might be the case, try this. Maintain a physical location of your choice. Say your child’s name, just above their volume. Pause and take a couple deep breaths. Wait for them to make eye contact. If necessary, try saying the child’s name just a bit louder this time. Then, pause and breathe again. Finally, drop your message to a whisper. This helps your child lean in and engage in active listening. You should also use this strategy if you are losing their attention during a conversation. Lowering your volume will typically cause the child to listen more closely, so as not to miss out.

Schedules and Routines Matter:

As school resumes and extracurricular activities begin, it is vital to address the importance of schedules and routines. All children do best when they can rely on consistency throughout their day. Having a regular schedule or sticking to a consistent routine can help children build trust, maintain emotional regulation, and build independence.

Trust-Schedules provide children with security by building trust with their caregivers. Consistency equates to love for children because they learn that their needs will be met through their daily routine. Successful implementation of a routine teaches children that adults care for them and have their best interests in mind, which helps children comply even when a task is non-preferred.

Emotional Regulation-When children know what to expect, they can remain calm, knowing what to expect next. Children can otherwise experience anxiety about the unknown. Routines also reduce conflict and refusal behaviors because compliance occurs when children know what is expected of them.

Building Independence- Routines help build independence in children. When children know what is expected or what is coming, they can perform those tasks without prompting. For example, when the family is excused from the dinner table, a child may choose to go play. However, if clearing the table is part of the routine, the children participate because they understand the task as “next” on the schedule.

All children should have a visual schedule available to them, paired with words, either spoken or written, to help them build trust, maintain emotional regulation, and to build independence.

Building School back into the Schedule:

The start of a new school year is filled with anticipation and anxiety, for some. School means altering your summer routines to set your children up for success and to keep you from burning-out. Making room for your child’s education in your routine illustrates your interest in their endeavors.

First, you should prepare a study area. It might be the dinner table or a special place on the couch. You don’t need to buy anything new or create a new space—you just need to redefine a place free from distraction, during homework time.

Next, you must commit to making homework a priority. There is mixed research about the value of homework, but regardless of how you feel, if it is assigned, it needs to be done. Your attitudes towards homework will impact your child’s, so keep it positive. If you are struggling to understand the homework or feel unequipped to help with homework, ask! Teachers are available and work best in a partnership with you. If it appears that your child is struggling with the content of their homework, reach out to the teacher immediately.

In addition to homework, plan to read with your child daily. A child who reads 20 minutes daily will be exposed to 1,800,000 words per year, through books alone. However, a child who reads 1 minute per day is only exposed to 8,000 words each year. Reading consistently equates to success across all school subjects and leads to more confident learners. Commit to making reading part of your daily routine.

Finally, be intentional about teaching your children healthy lifestyle choices. Make a habit of making healthy meals—especially when you have picky eaters. Meal planning is essential to make sure your children are fueled by healthy, nutritious food, which will instill lifelong habits. Also, enforce healthy sleep habits. Children should get adequate sleep; this includes getting to bed on time and getting up with enough time to prepare for the day.

When you commit to making these adjustments to your routine, your children will be able to seamlessly transition from summer to school!

Fine Motor Tasks to Build Writing Skills:

Writing can trigger behaviors in children. Children can get upset, shutdown, or exhibit avoidance behaviors when faced with writing tasks. Even children with extravagant ideas can appear to be struggling writers because of fine motor deficits. Putty and slime have become very popular among children and while it can be fun, it can definitely serve a purpose. Here are five fine motor activities that will benefit children and their fine motor skills.

- **Playdough and putty** are considered heavy work—due to kneading and stretching. Children can gain the most benefit from squeezing, pinching, stretching, and rolling putty into snakes. They can also cut it with scissors for additional benefit.
- **Painting** can be helpful for children gain fine motor dexterity and improve hand-eye coordination. For an extra challenge, try paint by number.
- **Sponges or water droppers** can be used to transfer water from one bowl to another. This helps build finger dexterity and forearm strength.
- **Rice** and tweezers can be used to create a fun race. Like the water “game” above, you can fill a bowl with rice and move it from one to another. If this is too hard for the child, you can use beads of various sizes or cereal.
- **Get in the garden!** Children should dig in the dirt and plant seeds. This builds finger dexterity and forearm strength. With winter coming, you can bring gardening inside with Rubbermaid bins.