

Learning to Listen, Listening to Learn

Building essential skills in young children

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Teachers as Listeners

Becoming an effective listener is an exciting and rewarding experience. It is only fair to emphasize, however, that improving listening abilities is difficult, demanding, and challenging.

—James Floyd

On a long, cross-country flight, a boy who appeared to be about 7 years old and a silver-haired woman chatted nonstop, their gestures and facial expressions showing that both were enjoying the conversation thoroughly. As the passengers began lining up to exit the aircraft, a man said to the boy, “You and your grandma can go ahead,” to which the woman replied, “Well, thank you very much, but this nice young man is not my grandson. We had the pleasure of getting acquainted during the trip.” I could not resist asking, was she a teacher? She answered, with quiet pride, “Yes, I taught elementary school for 37 years, but now I am retired.” This veteran teacher clearly had mastered the art of conversing with a young child.

Learning how to interact verbally with young children is no small accomplishment. Adults need to take a great share of the responsibility for successful communication when interacting with a young child.

[By] directing attention, organizing and structuring the time course of the conversation, storing information to compensate for the child’s

weaker working memory, reminding, monitoring, and prompting... [the adult] facilitates and supports the child's language production and, at the same time, models listening behavior. (Imhof 2002, 42)

We demonstrate interest, care, and concern when we take the time to explore ideas with children, allow children time to collect their thoughts, exercise care about what we say directly to a child or within a child's hearing (Shidler-Lattz 2002), and respond not only to children's words but also to the feelings that underlie those words (Gartrell 2006).

Listening is also a way to support the goals of inclusion. Effective teachers listen "across differences" (Schultz 2003). Through thoughtful listening they get to know each child a little bit better, becoming aware of the social and cultural forces in that child's life. Teachers who listen effectively are tuned into the rhythm and balance of the classroom, so they recognize situations that could silence or exclude in time to intervene (Schultz 2003).

Listening and being listened to are major ways we all build and sustain relationships, and not only with children (Purdy 2006). Few people will admit that they are poor listeners, yet most of us have a long list of complaints about the listening habits of others. Whether it is wives and husbands, parents and teachers, bosses and employees, or coworkers, those who are being listened to are seldom satisfied.

The listening habits and styles of teachers

Early childhood educator and founder of the Reggio Emilia schools, Loris Malaguzzi, contends that we teach children to listen by being good listeners ourselves (NAEYC 1994). The question is: Are we models of good listening?

Before becoming teachers, every one of us has accumulated thousands of hours as a student. If our own education was typical, between 65 and 90 percent of our in-school time was spent listening (Gilbert 2005), mostly to teacher talk. "All evidence from research tells us that, in most classrooms, the range of opportunities for learners to contribute to talk is quite narrow and the amount of talk they contribute is relatively small" (Mercer 1995, 60). In other words, our own time as students may have ingrained in us the lesson that the

Are You a Good Listener?

Do you consider yourself to be a good listener? Try this activity to find out more about your listening skills:

Assemble in groups of three. One person will be the listener, one the speaker, and one the observer. The speaker will talk for three minutes without interruption (other than for clarification) about the most innovative thing she or he has done in teaching all year. The listener will attempt to practice all of the LADDERS skills. The observer will evaluate the listener by using the LADDERS list below and jotting down observations:

LADDERS to Active Listening

Look at the person you are talking with and use body language to express your interest.

Ask pertinent questions and make relevant comments after the speaker has finished.

Don't interrupt or allow yourself to become distracted. Keep asking yourself, "What's the point?"

Don't change the subject. Make a brief mental summary of the conversation as you go along. Take notes if it will help you to remember, but do not allow them to interfere with the communication.

Emotions should be kept under control. Try to identify with the speaker.

Respond appropriately to words and underlying meanings.

Slow down your internal thoughts and concentrate on the speaker's message (Gregg 1983).

Now change roles. After three more minutes, change roles again, so that each person has a turn in the listener's role. When the activity is finished, use the self-assessment below to evaluate how you behaved when you were the listener.

Listener's Self-Assessment

- Did three minutes seem like a long time to listen attentively?
- Was I able to resist distractions, or did my attention wane?
- Did I avoid judging the speaker, attending to her habits or mannerisms, reacting to particular words, or jumping to conclusions?
- Did I find myself thinking about what I might say, rather than focusing on what the speaker was saying?
- Did I listen "between the lines," taking in not only the explicit messages but also the implicit ones?

After completing the self-assessment, compare and contrast it with the observer's notes on your listening behavior.

Source: Based on Vining & Yrle (1980).

teacher's role is to talk and children's role is to listen—exactly the *opposite* of Malaguzzi's advice. Because teachers tend to “deliver lessons using the same structure their instructors used to teach them” (Gilbert 2005, 1), we may have to “unlearn” that lesson before we can become the model listeners that children in our classrooms need us to be.

As described in Chapter 1, *effective listening* means the listener takes in the message accurately and interprets it appropriately. Effective listeners also adapt quickly to particular listening contexts and situations (Imhof 2004). For example, teachers who are effective listeners listen differently depending on whether they are studying, talking with family or friends, planning with colleagues, or interacting with a professional from another field.

Listening is influenced by context, but many adults also have a preferred listening style, defined as a set of “attitudes, beliefs, and predispositions about the how, where, when, who, and what of the information reception and encoding process” (Watson, Barker, & Weaver 1995, 2). About 40 percent of listeners have one strong style to which they resort—especially when under pressure or in situations where they feel unsure; about another 40 percent have no set preference (Barker & Watson 2000). Acknowledging the following listening styles can help us as we examine our own skills and challenges:

- **People-oriented** listeners are interested in demonstrating concern for others' emotions and interests, finding common ground, and responding.
- **Action-oriented** listeners are interested in direct, concise, error-free communication that is used to negotiate and accomplish a goal; these listeners are easily frustrated by disorganized presentations.
- **Content-oriented** listeners are interested in intellectual challenge and complex information; they want to carefully evaluate information before forming judgments and opinions.
- **Time-oriented** listeners prefer brief communication; such listeners seek interaction that is concise and to the point, and they desire to know the length of time available before the communication begins.

Research into adult listening styles suggests that people rate themselves as better listeners than their peers judge them to be; gender stereotypes often cause peers to rate females as *people-oriented* and males as *action-oriented*, even when they are not. A country's dominant culture or subgroups within a country may tend to prefer a particular style. For example, several studies found that young adults in America lean toward the *people-oriented* style, in which the goal is to find common ground and express concern through listening (Barker & Watson 2000; Kiewitz et al. 1997; Sargent & Weaver 2003; Timm & Schroeder 2000). We may have a different listening style outside of the classroom, but in the classroom, many teachers gravitate toward the *action-* and *time-oriented* styles.

About 80 percent of teachers' interaction in classrooms is task-oriented: Teachers tend to give instructions (e.g., "Everyone hold your paper this way"), supply information (e.g., "All of these animals lay eggs"), or make corrections (e.g., "This is a *b*, not a *d*"). Approximately 80 percent of teachers' task-oriented talk consists of low-level questions that require children to recall some bit of information (Kerry 1982), instead of teacher talk that emphasizes higher-level questions that move beyond remembering information.

The typical teacher/child verbal exchange in many classrooms consists of the teacher's question, the child's short reply, and a quick teacher assessment of whether or not the response meets the teacher's expectations. This traditional pedagogy—in which we are dispensers of information and students are passive recipients—is an approach we all should use less often in the classroom, preschool through graduate school. Consider this example:

On the first sunny day after a long winter, a preschool class gathered for their morning circle time. After the children sang a weather song, the teacher displayed the class weather chart and asked, "Tamika, what is the weather today?" Tamika looked out the window, smiled, and said excitedly, "Spring!" The teacher replied, "No. It has to be one of the weather symbols: *windy, rainy, cloudy, sunny, or snowy.*"

Tamika's response was not wrong; it just wasn't what the teacher wanted to hear. Williams (1992) explains what happens when teachers rush to evaluate a child's response:

The pupil who appears most able is the one who is most successful at guessing the framework within which the teacher is operating, the one

who guesses what it is that the teacher really wants to know. What the teacher cannot tell from these kinds of interactions is how well individual children are able to use their oral language to show what they are really understanding. (111)

A better a listening response would have been for that teacher to say, “Yes, it does feel like spring today. Which weather symbol will you choose for the calendar?” The way we receive children’s responses communicates expectations to them about what and how language can and should be used (Pantaleo 2007).

What if a child’s contribution to a discussion is a factual error, such as when a child misinterprets a story the class is reading? Many teachers feel it is their responsibility to step in and correct the error. Instead, Aukerman (2006) finds that:

[The] teacher’s refusal to judge their ideas as right or wrong enabled the students to share responsibility for closely evaluating their own and one another’s ideas.... Taking students’ ideas seriously—even when those ideas seem tangential, unsupported, or incomprehensible...means following up on precisely those ideas that most puzzle you, engaging students with one another’s ideas, and monitoring your impulse to bring things back to the ideas that you consider most important. (40–41)

Really listening to children

Despite all the benefits of really seeing and hearing children,

as teachers we are often ambivalent about the talk that goes on in our classrooms. We want it, and yet we don’t.... But what do we make of the talk that eludes our control, that slips into the territories for which we have not planned? Is it important? Is it noise? Or is it talk, communication? (Salyer 1994, 42)

Children know when we are not really listening to them, just like they know when we skip pages while reading their favorite picture book. Children pay particular attention to overt signs of attentive listening. Imhof (2002), for example, asks elementary school children what a person who listens well (and poorly) does:

- Children’s top five criteria for judging someone a *good* listener are that the person (1) makes eye contact appropriately, (2) is patient and does not interrupt, (3) asks questions in a nonthreatening tone, (4) is responsive both verbally and nonverbally, and (5) prepares for listening.

Do You Listen to All Kinds of Children?

Ask yourself these questions to help you reflect on your habits as a listener in an inclusive classroom:

- How do I deal with children who seldom talk or are very soft-spoken? Do I encourage them to remain quiet to keep the level of children's talk in the classroom low, or do I make a genuine attempt to draw them into conversation?
- How do I deal with children who are exceptionally talkative or loud? Do I make assumptions about them and their families? Do my assumptions differ based on gender, race, or culture?
- Do I listen patiently to children who have difficulty expressing their ideas and struggle to be understood, or do I quickly move on? Do I make opportunities for them to be heard, not only by me but also by their peers?
- What do I do when children who have asked for a chance to speak fall silent when their turn comes? Am I sensitive to the fact that young children can forget what they were about to say, and do I ensure they have another chance to speak?
- How about when children's behavior is challenging—does everyone get treated fairly, or does the child skilled in verbal expression (e.g., a "smooth talker") avoid consequences more often?
- Do I ask many different types of questions, allowing more children chances to contribute, or do I play the "read the teacher's mind" game much of the time?
- When children say something of questionable accuracy, how do I handle it? Do I pounce on the statement as a "lie," or do I try to get further clarification? If I know it to be untrue or inaccurate, do I lose respect for the child, or remember that the line between fantasy and reality for young children is a dotted one? Do I consider that children sometimes express wishes as fact, and acknowledge this sensitively, with a comment such as, "Yes, wouldn't it be nice if we could ..."
- How do I respond if a child shares something that makes me uncomfortable (e.g., "My cat got runned over by a car" ... "My dad promised to take me camping, but I waited all weekend and he never came to get me"). Do I quickly move on, or do I acknowledge the feelings that underlie the message ("It is so sad to lose our pets" ... "You were upset that a promise was broken")?

Interestingly, children identify *friends* and *grandparents* as their favorite listeners (two groups often willing to give more of their time).

- Children's criteria for judging someone a *poor* listener are that the person (1) does not make eye contact, (2) is not focused on the message being conveyed, (3) is too busy or preoccupied to listen, (4) is not interested, and (5) gives little or no verbal or nonverbal feedback.

Children and adults give very similar answers, except that children rate someone a good listener if he or she prepares for listening (e.g., turns off the television, invites the child to cuddle); whereas adults are more concerned about a listener being open-minded and non-judgmental (Imhof 2002).

Children need us to listen to them. As such, they can best judge whether or not we have been listening effectively. We can best meet children's need to be heard if, when we evaluate our own listening skills, we take into consideration children's thoughts on what makes a good listener.

Listening to parents/families

Life for young children is shaped by relationships. To thrive, children need settings where all the important adults in their lives care about them and about each other. At the minimum, a child needs family and teacher to share information and coordinate their efforts. But beyond the practical, children feel more "listened to" when relationships between their families and their teachers are warm, collaborative, and respectful. When there is a positive relationship between family and teacher, the benefits are many: teachers feel comfortable bonding with children, children get seamless care, teachers feel rewarded, parents relax, and both become more trusting and tolerant of the other (Baker & Manfredi/Petitt 2004). When the adults who care for a child aren't listening to each other, it is the child who suffers most (Gonzalez-Mena 1998; Kendall 1996).

Failure to communicate is a serious detriment to any relationship; conversely, really listening to another person is a powerful relationship-building tool. "Connecting with others is at the heart of communication—defined best as one person understanding what

Is Your Thinking a Barrier to Listening?

Talking too much—"If I do all the talking, you'll go along with my thinking."

Talking too little—"If I say nothing, I can end this conversation."

Judging—"I'm in the right."

Blaming—"You're in the wrong."

Preoccupation with self—"You ought to think/feel/ behave as I expect."

Topping—"You won't believe what happened to *me*."

Defensiveness—"It's not my fault."

Counterattack—"How dare you criticize me. You're not perfect."

Denial—"Problem? What problem?"

Diverting—"I'll never forget the day they..."

Assuming—"I know exactly how you feel."

Advising—"I know just what you should do."

Control—"I need to be in charge."

Helplessness—"It is what it is."

Source: Based on Burns (1999).

another wants understood. The key to this understanding is listening" (Gilbert 2005, 2). Awareness of other people's feelings and mood states is essential, both in effective listening and in empathy (Bommelje, Houston, & Smither 2003). At its most sophisticated levels, listening is combined with empathy so that we can discern another person's thoughts and feelings with some degree of accuracy and listen on an intuitive as well as a literal level (Comer & Drollinger 1999). The box *above* identifies thinking that gets in the way of our listening to families.

The kind of empathetic listening that parents and other family members often need from early childhood educators is *reflective listening*, which differs from ordinary listening in four important ways. Reflective listening means the listener: (1) listens thoughtfully to the meaning of the speaker's words; (2) considers the content of the message, both stated and implied; (3) thinks about the feelings associated with the message, attending to the speaker's verbal and nonverbal cues; and (4) makes every effort to reflect that message

back accurately. For example,

A mother and father attend a parent conference. The mother says, "Our son is not doing well in reading. This really worries us because my husband struggled for years with reading until he found out he was dyslexic."

How should the teacher respond? Many ineffective listening responses arise from a certain level of discomfort with discussing difficult issues such as this one. Sometimes, teachers attempt to gloss over concerns out of a false sense of being "nice." So, a teacher might dismiss the parents' concerns (e.g., "Oh, his reading is not that bad") or change the subject ("He's doing well in math, though") rather than respond to the concern. Such responses leave the parents feeling that their worries are unacknowledged and unimportant. Instead, a reflective listening response—one that communicates understanding—might be,

"It sounds as though you have been worrying that your son could be dyslexic and wondering what can be done to prevent him from having the same kind of struggles that your husband experienced as a child."

This type of response opens the door to further discussion because the parents' concerns have been recognized. Reflective listening truly encourages the speaker—it "heartens" and "emboldens." Feeling validated, parents might continue with, "We just want to do everything possible to prevent reading problems," a goal with which the teacher can affiliate:

"As a teacher, that is my goal too. Your son can benefit from more experiences with books. There are many resources we can use to help. I'll be sending home some collections of picture books you can share. I also have information about the free preschool story time at the public library."

As teachers gain practice with reflective listening, they realize that it is a way of demonstrating care, concern, and support while inviting more dialogue with families.

Additional strategies

Here are some additional strategies for communicating effectively with parents/families:

Show cultural sensitivity. Discrimination, prejudice, and stereo-

typing interfere with effective communication, and certainly have no place in an early childhood setting. Less malevolent but still damaging to communication between teachers and families is ignorance of or insensitivity to a child's home culture. Knowing something about a child's religion, for example, is one way to help us better know the child and prevent cultural insensitivity. We need, at the very least, to respect and have a basic understanding of children's belief systems (and to show similar respect if children are not part of any religious tradition). It is also essential to teach children to respect their classmates' religions. It may even be helpful to familiarize children with certain key elements (such as holidays, styles of dress, etc.), which will make them more sensitive to those around them (Couchenour & Chrisman 2003; Hoot, Szecsi, & Moosa 2003). As Timm and Schroeder (2000) note:

To communicate with diverse groups, individuals need to become knowledgeable about these diverse cultures, including their communication patterns, especially in relation to listening/nonverbal communication.... Individuals who are more competent intercultural communicators... tend to be more multiculturally sensitive. (110, 113)

Ask questions that matter. Ask parents/families about their hopes and dreams for their child—you may be surprised. Sometimes their goals are related to school readiness, such as the goals of these parents of a preschooler: "We just want her to learn her letters and numbers and how to write a little bit." At other times, their hopes for their children have more to do with social and emotional development. New to the United States, these parents from Bangladesh had an important goal for their kindergartner: "If only she could have just one little friend to eat lunch with." Include parents in thoroughly discussing the curriculum. Ask them what the school/program is doing that is right for their child; ask them what could be improved. Ask them how they prefer to communicate with the school and what makes them feel heard and respected.

Meet frustration and anger with calm. Parents sometimes use language in ways that can make teachers feel unappreciated. If a parent says, "I attended that meeting about the new writing program, but it was a big waste of time," a teacher's impulse may be defensive: "Well, I think it was a great program." It is better simply to let parents know you heard the message (reflective listening), and keep

the tone positive. You might say, "Evidently the meeting didn't have much value for you. Do you have any suggestions for what would make it more helpful?" When we talk with parents, even distraught or angry parents, we need to use the same tone and manner as we would use with a highly esteemed colleague. Do not meet frustration and anger with your frustration and anger; the more intense the situation becomes, the calmer *you* need to become.

Use "feel/felt/found." Another way to hear a critical message without becoming defensive is to use a strategy called "feel/felt/found" (Garmston 2005). First, accept the feelings expressed by the person (this is the "feel" part):

"Many people feel as you do..."

Next, identify with the concern personally (this is the "felt" part):

"I used to have some of those same worries and felt that way, too..."

Finally, show how your ideas have been changed (this is the "found" part):

"But now that I have worked with many, many young children, I have found..."

Showing this progression of thought is a more effective way to defuse a situation than blurting out, "I disagree!"

Focus on the one big thing. When negotiating an issue with parents, try to determine what the major sticking point is. If you can yield on that "one big thing," do so. If not, explain why you cannot. If, for example, a parent wants you to use corporal punishment, you might say, "I understand what you are saying, but it is against our school rules and the laws in this country for teachers to hit a child. We will have to find another way, a way to encourage good behavior rather than punish misbehavior."

Don't reject the parent. When a parent tells us something that is problematic but important to know, keeping the lines of communication open takes priority. That was the situation here:

A preschooler who was obviously terrified crawled under the desk and lashed out at anyone who came near. No one could figure out what was going on with this 4-year-old until her teenage mother said, "We watch really scary slasher movies together because I'm afraid to watch them alone. Do you think that's a bad idea?"

Rather than chastising or isolating this young mother for hurting her daughter, the teacher said, “Since you asked the question, it sounds as though you suspect that these movies might be frightening to your child. I agree with you. You should stop having her watch those movies.” If, instead, the teacher had jumped to criticize, this parent probably would not have asked such a question again, and the teacher would have lost an important source of insight into the child’s home life.

Be responsible with what you hear. In the interest of effective communication, teachers (and parents) have to agree to behave responsibly with what we hear young children say—and they do say the darnedest things. Here are two situations that called for tact and calm from all involved:

On her first day of first grade, a child said to her teacher, “Remember me from kindergarten? If you don’t recognize me, it’s because I got my hair cut. It used to be really long—all the way down to my butt. I got it cut the same day my dad shaved off his beard. My mom said she wouldn’t sleep with him anymore if he didn’t shave it off.”

The teacher imagined correctly that this first-grader’s parents would not want their personal business broadcasted, and she took care not to repeat what she heard to other teachers in the program.

Empathy—putting ourselves in the other person’s shoes—is key in keeping parents and teachers listening to each other. In the next example, the parent checked out what he heard, saving the teacher from being accused of mistreating children:

When a father asked, “What did you do at child care today?” his preschool daughter replied, in disgust, “They made us eat dirt and worms.” The father was skeptical, so the next day at drop-off he asked her teacher about it. As it turned out, another parent had brought a “dirt cake” to the class picnic—a clean flowerpot filled with ground-up Oreo cookie “dirt” and Gummy Worms.

Identify with parents/families. A program’s failure to commit to effective communication undermines the collaboration necessary to support children’s learning. In this example, the school may have thought it was communicating with the family, but the father’s reaction implies something different about what messages were being heard:

The parents of a second-grader were asked to come to school to discuss their son’s academic performance. When they arrived, they

were shocked and surprised to hear that his reading skills were far below those of his peers, and that the school was recommending support services. The presence of the principal, the classroom teacher, the reading specialist, and an instructional support team teacher made the parents feel outnumbered. As the team began suggesting how the parents could help at home, the father interrupted angrily, "Teaching him to read is your job! This is the first I've heard about serious reading problems. Why weren't we told about this sooner?"

Such outbursts are apt to occur when parents feel that educators have not adequately communicated with them. It may also be that what the teachers intend as a discussion of the child's difficulties with reading, the parents perceive as criticism of them and their parenting skills. This situation illustrates the communication breakdowns that occur when educators exercise power over parents and families with little attention to the parents' perspectives. Clearly, too, the father's reaction will make future communication between home and school more difficult and strained, as it goes against many of the commonsense principles for effective listening.

Effective programs recognize the importance of developmentally appropriate practice for "establishing reciprocal relationships

Commonsense Communicating

According to experts, the best ways to promote effective communication don't change:

- Try to put the other person at ease. Use reflective listening strategies, and if possible, empathize with the speaker.
- Demonstrate your willingness to listen by withholding judgment until you've heard the other person out.
- Be patient and persist in trying to understand the speaker's message.
- Keep your own emotions under control.
- Be very slow to disagree, criticize, argue, or interrupt. Try asking questions instead.
- Resist distractions, and try to concentrate on the central ideas. Take notes if it helps.
- Strive to find areas of agreement, or "common ground."

Sources: Nichols & Stevens (1957a; 1957b); Wolvin (2006).

with families” (NAEYC 1997), and they actively seek input from parents and other family members (Bushman & Buster 2002). There are numerous ways we can ensure that family input is heard:

- **Home visits.** Some programs ask to conduct home visits to get a sense of children’s family, cultural, and community backgrounds.
- **Mailings.** Schools, programs, and districts often send home requests for information in the form of questionnaires. Calendars of important events let families know about scheduled opportunities to be heard in person.
- **Group interviews.** Programs sometimes collect feedback on an issue by asking a representative group of parents to participate in a group interview or focus group.
- **Regular communications.** Programs should know how families prefer to keep in touch (in-person meetings, telephone conversations, quick exchanges at pickup or drop-off, notes, emails, etc.), and they should communicate often.
- **Evaluations of materials.** Many programs loan out materials that children can take home, such as books and audiotapes. Often the parent is asked to complete a brief evaluation card, to learn which materials were more and less useful.
- **Parent-teacher conferences.** These are the oldest and most common opportunities for families to interact with their child’s teacher. (For more about conferencing, see Seplocha 2007.)

Listening to our colleagues

When communication breaks down, it can disrupt and sometimes do permanent damage to professional relationships. That is what happened between a supervising teacher and her supervisee:

“My student teacher was responsible for bringing insects to kindergarten class so that the children could observe them. I told her about this well in advance and made arrangements for her to get the insects from the high school biology teacher. I also reminded her about it. The day before our theme on insects was to begin, I asked if she had picked them up and she said no. I said, ‘Well, then, you are going to be busy after school today because I am not disappointing the children.’ To her

credit, by the next morning she had gathered enough insects on her own for the children to observe with their magnifying glasses and begin their journals. But why didn't she listen to me?"

As a result of this event, each teacher lowered her opinion of the other: The student teacher felt her mentor teacher had "turned on her," and the mentor teacher felt her student teacher was irresponsible. Within a few weeks, the student teacher had withdrawn from the program, saying that she was too stressed to continue.

As it did in this example, when we fail to listen to the explicit and implicit messages our colleagues send us, it can result in embarrassment, costly mistakes, hurt feelings, diminished professional effectiveness, and worse. Poor listening skills in the workplace can have significant consequences, which helps to explain why businesses invest in listening training (Burley-Allen 1995). They know that listening is a key to effective leadership (Steil & Bommelje 2004). "Employees feel more valued when their supervisors listen to their opinions, and we trust people who listen to us" (Bentley 2000, 139). Interestingly, when 2,000 businesspeople were asked to draw a caricature of a successful, value-driven leader, 90 percent drew large ears, a big heart, or both:

The message is clear: Effective leaders hear what others have to say and empathize with their issues...People perceive a lack of empathy because those around them don't take the time to find out what they are feeling—and, yes, don't take the time to listen. So, these two characteristics—caring and feeling—are very much intertwined. Effective leaders listen empathetically. (Lucia 1997, 25)

Research tells us that listening with empathy is the basis for a host of important workplace skills and strategies—assessing situations, making rational decisions, generating connections between theory and practice, arriving at deeper understandings about beliefs, adapting to new perspectives, informing instructional decisions, challenging traditions, improving teaching and learning, and validating ideals (Black 2001; Ferraro 2000; Conderman & Morin 2004; Risko, Roskos, & Vukelich 2002). Leaders who know the value of listening will emphasize collegiality and colleagues listening to one another.

Listening also can be a useful tool for reflecting with your colleagues. The following group activity is adapted from Conderman and Morin (2004) and Kamp (2006).

To set a context for the reflection, begin from some shared assumptions:

- All of us are engaged in learning from one another. We are bound by a responsibility, not only to further our own learning but also to help all members of the community learn effectively.
- Learning requires a mutual effort in helping one another understand the differing points of view we may bring to a topic, issue, or situation.
- It is important to stay in communication even when we are confused or fearful or unsure because this is the only way to explore appropriate solutions to problems.
- Learning begins by relating information, events, and perspectives to our previous learning, backgrounds, and experiences; it then moves into applying newly acquired insights to the current circumstances.
- A mature individual has learned that “understanding” does not imply *agreement*. It is possible to disagree and critique without rancor, hostility, or personal attacks.

Next, consider these questions about listening, discussing them as a group:

- Why is listening different today than the way it was years ago?
- What are some things that make it difficult to listen?
- In reviewing our curriculum, where is the teaching of listening skills evident?
- What have we done to improve our skills as listeners?
- How has technology affected listening in the educational context?
- How do we decide the best way to communicate (face-to-face, telephone, email, etc.) with various stakeholders?
- What measures do we take to include everyone in the process and communicate effectively with diverse speakers and listeners?

Finally, try some of these reflective listening exercises:

- Conference with a colleague about why she pursued a teaching career, her pivotal influences, and what has kept her in the profession.

- Switch roles; temporarily accept an assignment that a colleague normally has but one that you could do comfortably. Discuss how your usual roles overlap and ways that communication between the two of you could benefit children.
- Copy and share with the group an educational issue covered in the newspaper; a pithy, thought-provoking quotation; or online discussion group posting to stimulate dialogue (and perhaps debate).
- Reflect on your teaching day or a particularly challenging situation, being careful to protect confidentiality. Share your reflection with a trusted colleague or mentor, and discuss.
- Describe a significant change that you have made in your teaching, what prompted the change, and its results.

Conclusion

Educators today are in an almost constant state of information overload (Hayakawa 1999). The average worker in the United States handles more than 200 messages a day in the form of phone calls, emails, faxes, postal mail, and interoffice mail (Bentley 2000). Technology is changing “what we listen to, whom we listen to, and how we listen” (Bentley 2000, 129). In the past when we listened, we were generally face-to-face with the speaker, or at least were listening live. Now, however, much of our communication—email, voice mail, and the like—is not in person or doesn’t occur in real time (Wolvin & Coakley 2000).

Even when we are listening in real time, on a cell phone, for example, listening has become more multi-layered. During a cell phone conversation, we expect the speaker to be doing something else. If we find out what that is, it creates a certain impression; we might think differently about someone who is talking to us while at the beach, versus mowing the lawn, versus attending an international conference. Whether we think about it consciously or not, during the conversation we assess what the speaker is saying as well as what she is *not* saying because of where she is or whom she is with. So technology has changed not only the tools we use to listen, but also when and where we use them, and even what we think about as we listen.

In our overloaded, fast-paced world, modern views of listening competence focus on two dimensions:

Appropriateness requires that listeners understand the content of the interaction and avoid violating conversation norms or rules excessively. *Effectiveness* requires that interaction goals be met or needs, desires, and intentions are satisfied. Listening competency, then, requires successfully adapting to situations and achieving intended or desired results through communication. (Bentley 2000, 138, italics added)

Thus, it is no longer sufficient to “get the message”; rather, the expectation is that taking the time to listen will shape our relationships (Cooper 1997). By listening attentively to children, their families, and our colleagues, early childhood educators are forging the kinds of connections that produce high-quality programs for the very young.

Learning to Listen – The following article was given to me as part of a package of course material for an Introductory English Summer Course for new undergraduate students many years ago. I have kept it because it includes some good ideas about how to improve listening skills, but also some not so good ideas for lower level learners. You can listen to the article as well as read if you wish by clicking the “start” button on the player below. <https://xpressenglish.com/wp-content/uploads/Audio/Learning-to-Listen.mp3>. Students often come to me and ask how to improve their listening skills. Us Learning to Listen, for adult and young adult learners of American English, is packed with engaging topics, striking personalities and dynamic listening sources. It is fresh, lively course offering students’ opportunities to: * listen for different purposes. * observe people engaged in real, everyday activities. * build confidence in listening to spoken English. You can