



## Early Listening – Are you listening comfortably? Then we'll begin.

Sue Lewis explains how listening skills develop and what Teachers of the Deaf can do to support the process

With due respect to those who do not remember the old radio programme, 'Listening with mother', I have plagiarised and adapted unashamedly from its opening lines; hopefully to set a very pragmatic context for the development of listening skills. In reflecting on such contexts we have to be careful not to stereotype or idealise. We are, however, reminded that listening is an interactive process, requiring a partner or something that is creating a sound. The world of listening is not just concerned with listening to noise, but actually with making sense of noise; there is an implication that within the noises that surround us there are some that need attending to more than others.

Both hearing and listening are brain activities that draw upon intact or, in the case of children who are deaf, 'supported' non-intact hearing mechanisms. Although hearing is a prerequisite for listening, 'normal' hearing is not. As experienced Teachers of the Deaf and audiologists we can all point to individual students or adults who listen more effectively than many hearing children and adults. However, this is not universal and it certainly cannot be assumed that, because a child has now been provided with amplification whether via hearing aids or cochlear implants, listening as opposed to 'hearing' will occur automatically.

Trevarthen (2004) reminds us that any skills that neonates develop are rooted in their disposition to make contact through eye gaze, orientation, voice, body movement and gesture. His research provides powerful evidence for such contact, shared experience and meaning to be the driving force for social interaction, learning and communication. He demonstrates the rich sensitivity that neonates have for the rhythm and sympathy of human expression, whether visual or auditory but stresses that any learning at this time is based within the relationships established between caregivers and their child. Sound is a hugely important part of this relationship as are touch and vision and to isolate one or another is to deny any child the opportunity to learn from the synchrony that pervades their experiences. Very young babies search out the regularity within their environment so that familiar sounds reassure and help them to predict and to live in a stable world. Hearing is an alerting sense, keeping us in touch with what is happening, alerting us to new events that hopefully are not threatening, allowing us to determine what we will pay attention to and what we need not.

Such skills are learned early by young babies as they learn to recognise and switch out the different environmental sounds that everyone else barely notices such as the central heating system, the traffic noise outside, the everyday noises of our homes. The Hoover frightens and then no longer matters, the washing machine disturbs hugely and then hardly matters. There are similar learning journeys to be made by young deaf children. In the days when hearing aids were fitted later there were many

'listening walks' where we went to find the source of a noise so that the child could consign it to the 'background', once it had been understood. Like new born babies we had to revisit these sounds many times before they stopped inordinately distracting the child – as if their brain needed the reassurance that these were indeed noises that could be ignored.

A young profoundly deaf adult reported a similar experience when he received his first cochlear implant. At 24 and a good hearing aid wearer from the point of diagnosis and fitting, he had received mostly low frequency input via his hearing aids until now. He had achieved much, having a very good degree in engineering and many hearing and deaf friends. The cochlear implant, however, offered access to a much wider range of sound which he too had to 'sort out' and learn to listen to. For a short while he was very much a 'baby' again in listening terms, although cognitively very different – discovering new sounds and rediscovering old ones. His first reaction was 'I never knew the world was so noisy. How do you put up with it?' Months later he was at his ease and full of praise for the ways in which now he could now 'hear things that give me such joy and am able to hear and listen to my friends.'

Of course in learning which sounds to ignore or just monitor and which ones to attend to, it is critical that the human voice keeps its prominence. Ultimately the child's 'listening' skills will support the movement from this instinctive communication into use of the usually spoken language systems that surround most children. The sensitivity of the baby's ear to human voice and particularly to the mother's voice is well documented, as are the various ways parents 'grab their child's ears' to ensure that they do in fact attend to them. Child directed speech, proximity and touch secure this for hearing babies. The importance of replicating such conditions for young deaf children from the moment they are aided cannot be over-emphasised.

Although Gallaway and Richards (1994) remind us that child rearing practices differ in terms of the exact features of child directed speech and language used with young children and by whom, its more rhythmic and intimate nature is universal. All cultures sing to their children, using the versatility of the human voice to soothe and arouse, to hold attention and gain cooperation according to intention. In singing and humming to children, cultures help them to recognise, listen to and try out intonation, rhythmic patterns and ultimately key phrases and vocabulary in sentential boundaries. The regularity with which these songs and rhymes are shared heighten the child's awareness not only of the prosodic features of the language that surrounds but also provides a much enjoyed interaction that is rarely anything other than fun. Words are interchanged to make the 'song' even more meaningful as the child's names or favourite activities feature. Such contexts move shared

attention beyond the visually orchestrated to shared attention and enjoyment of words and actions and ultimately stories and non-present objects and events.

Children develop their early listening skills in meaningful everyday experiences with their parents and others. The disposition to interact with others and to search for regularity and patterns may be as Trevarthen suggests innate and rooted in the child's social and emotional needs. However, it provides the foundations for the skills the child will need to detect the regularity and patterns in spoken language and in the sounds around them. It is voice that gains a pre-eminence over environmental sounds which are always there to alert, to warn and to comfort but are not the substance of relationships. Occasionally still Teachers of the Deaf and others make the mistake of feeling they are checking on listening skills by focusing on environmental sounds or on sounds in isolation. The Ling sounds, for example, are invaluable for a quick check on the range of sounds the child has access to i.e. can hear. They do not tell us about the child's listening. Listening involves tracking sounds over time and ultimately making sense of them. The teaching of individual sounds in isolation runs the danger of encouraging children to think that the job is to identify sounds rather than their meaning. That is not to say there is not a case for helping the child to identify sounds around them – the danger is that it stops there. That is a fire engine – so what? It is imperative that children realise that when we hear such sounds we think about them – where is it going? Oh dear, is it a fire? Is that my car alarm? And even, why do cows moo or cats purr?

In my earliest contacts with families of young deaf children, whatever the degree of hearing loss, I have always advised them to think about what they have done with their other children or have observed others doing with theirs as invariably this has 'worked'. Usually this has provided subconscious support for listening skills and involves songs, rhyme, games and repetitious activities, alongside a very firm expectation that their child will eventually join in i.e. show that they were listening and learning all along.

There is, of course, the undisputable fact that 'ears need to be open'. In other words, hearing aids need to be worn (yes, even if they are going to be implanted), they need to provide the best amplification possible for this child and need to be working. Time spent with poor and ill-fitting ear moulds, a distorting hearing aid or without a hearing aid offers a child less opportunity to listen and learn and a signal that is degraded further. Lost time is just that – children will not get that listening (and learning) time back.

Families need to be inspired by their practitioners to believe at the very least that their child can hear better with hearing aids than without them. They need support and guidance to understand what this might look like and mean. The Level 2 materials linked to the Monitoring Protocol offer support for this, alongside the linked Fridge cards. The activities suggested are all located within everyday activities that families are reassured that they can do. However, their practitioners need to support them so that they understand how their child is showing that their skills are developing. James, for example, at seven months did not respond to conventional aided listening tests in clinic, but imitated intonation (not the words!) in much used phrases such as 'Oh dear!' or 'up it goes', often turning his head to look at a

speaker, particularly his mother, despite having delayed head control. Shany bounced rhythmically to 'I went to visit a farm one day', picking up the cow to attempt moo, moo, moo at 11 months. William joined in spontaneously with the actions to 'wind the bobbin up', vocalising 'pull, pull' at 19 months. All had listened to these many times before being able to join in and show expressively the fruits of their listening (and watching).

We all know that 'something has to go in before something can come out'. Hearing babies have the luxury of hearing and listening to the people and world around them for many months before there is any real concern about their listening development – and for almost all the pathway is smooth. Parents expect that it will happen and have instinctive but realistic expectations at any one time as to what their child should do. The diagnosis of a hearing loss makes us impatient and, despite the shortcomings of aids and implants, families and practitioners appear to want evidence of hearing and listening before the child has had enough evidence to work on. This can lead to 'quick fix' ideas, more designed to reassure us than to lay firm foundations for the child's listening skills. Thus traditional listening vehicles such as play activities, stories, songs, rhymes, everyday routines are sacrificed at the altar of specific programmes which do not transfer readily into everyday life. Children recognise environmental sounds, words and even sentences in discrete contexts but do not generalise these and are accused of being 'poor listeners' except in one to one. However, the contexts in which these skills have been 'taught', sometimes bear little semblance to the realities of the contexts in which children need to apply such skills.

Family life involves talking, listening, playing and laughing with individuals and groups. We may lament the growth of more visual toys and technology that appear to be replacing some forms of interaction between parents and children, but mostly still in the first years of life people remain the primary play object for young children. Adults and other children are much better noise makers than any other toys and the optimal promoter of listening skills. We are privileged to be able to support families now of very young babies who are deaf. As Teachers of the Deaf, however, we need to take care not to divert them way from this truth – they are the greatest plaything that their child has, the greatest source for their learning and the strongest motivator for the child's listening skills. Our job is to help monitor, reassure and suggest, to ensure the technology is effective and that parents then can promote their child's listening skills in age-proven ways.

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## References

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