

## Teaching Listening Skills

As well as learning to speak, pupils with learning difficulties have to learn to listen. They live in a world full of noises and have to learn to attend to what their teacher or parent or someone else is saying and ignore all of the other noises that they hear around them.

*It is important to develop the ability to attend, listen and discriminate between contrasting stimuli, for example, auditory, visual, tactile and olfactory. Teaching this aspect across key stages may help pupils to:*

- *listen and develop auditory memory, for example, responding to sounds in the environment or to the cessation of sound, attending to adult imitation of their own sounds, responding to their own name, imitation and turn-taking activities, responding appropriately to specific sounds, words and phrases and exploring language in different contexts*
- *maintain and develop concentration, for example, focusing on an activity, tracking a sound or movement, copying sequences of sounds, listening and attending to rhymes, stories and simple recounts linked to sensory cues, sustaining attention in different activities, and responding to instructions.*

(QCA, 2001, p.8)

Listening is something that has to be done actively. This is why teaching pupils to listen is so important. They may hear all sorts of familiar sounds around them in the classroom: the electric lights humming, the computers beeping, other pupils talking, the teacher giving instructions, and the rain on the roof. But just because they hear these sounds it does not follow that they have registered them. The passive nature of hearing is very different from the active nature of listening.

What does it mean to say that a pupil has heard a sound? The pupil may react to a sound stimulus but may not be consciously aware of it. This is merely an involuntary reflex. A sound above a certain threshold may be consciously detected or heard.

Sounds may be recognised as being the same (recognition) or different (discrimination). The ability to detect and discriminate sounds is known as auditory acuity, and is very much the focus here. Most children learn rapidly to focus on certain aspects of complex 'packages' of auditory stimuli and ignore others: this is known as auditory attention. When pupils begin to hear attentively they are said to be listening.

Learning to listen is also a part of the process of becoming a proficient reader. There has been much emphasis in recent years in primary schools and early years settings on phonic work aimed at securing fluent word recognition skills for reading by the age of seven years. The latest Government sponsored programme aimed at achieving this is the *Letters and Sounds* programme. The programme is structured in six phases and the first phase is concerned with developing speaking and listening skills prior to the systematic teaching of phonic work that begins at the second phase.

There is a wealth of literature containing practical ideas for teaching listening skills. The concern here is to delineate steps leading from emerging awareness of a range of sounds

and human speech sounds, through locating the source of sounds and associating particular sounds with particular sound sources, to discriminating sounds and finally beginning to associate written letters with particular sound values. The Phase One activities as described in *Letters and Sounds* tend to be suitable for pupils who already have learned to use and understand spoken words and it is essential to consider also what may be done to develop the listening skills of pupils who are developmentally much younger.

## **Reference**

Department for Education and Skills (2007) *Letters and Sounds: Principles and Practice of High Quality Phonics - Notes of Guidance for Practitioners and Teachers* London: Department for Education and Skills.

QCA (2001) *Planning, Teaching And Assessing The Curriculum For Pupils With Learning Difficulties: English Subject Guidelines*. Reissued in 2008. Sudbury: QCA Publications.