



# Listening Summary

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## Why Listening?

Your child's healthy development depends upon their growing ability to listen and understand what you and others are communicating. Listening skills can support your child's ability to engage in healthy relationships, to focus, and to learn.

## Step 1. Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their **Input**

- Consider how your child reacts when they are upset, angry, or frustrated. How do they show you? Check out some of the ways in which you can respond to your upset child that promote emotional competence.
  - If a child is crying, offer comfort items like a favorite teddy bear or a blanket. Do not attempt to talk anything through when a child is highly upset. Focus on calming down first.
  - If a child hits or bites in anger or frustration, stop and say, *"Ouch. That hurts my arm, and it hurts my feelings."* Then, be sure and reflect on the anger. *"You are angry. What can you do that is safe and doesn't hurt others when you're angry? Would squeezing your pillow help?"*
  - Each time your child is upset or expresses any big feeling, be sure and name the feeling and ask if you are correct. *"You seem angry. Is that right?"*

As you react to your child in ways that soothe, you will find they feel a greater sense of your understanding and responsiveness so that your interactions become more two-way instead of one-way even when they are highly upset.

## Step 2. **Teach New Skills** by Interactive Modeling

- Model listening while interacting with your child. Modeling listening skills can be one of the greatest teaching tools.
  - Share the focus. As you spend time with your child, follow their lead. As they pick up new toys or explore a different part of the room, move, notice, and name what they are exploring.<sup>1</sup>
  - Notice gestures and listen for thought and feeling. When they are expressing a feeling on their face or through their body, name it and ask them if it's true. *"I noticed your face is red and your shoulders are tense. You look worried. Are you feeling worried?"*

- Help your child develop an understanding of other people's feelings by asking them how they think other people feel in certain circumstances. You could say, *"I just bumped my elbow. How do you think I feel right now?"* Or when reading a story or in pretend play, you could ask, *"How do you think the little bear feels right now?"*
- Children require your attention to thrive. So, why not build a special time into your routine when you are fully present to listen to what your child has to tell you? Give it a special name you and your child create like "Mom and Susie's Special Time." Then, notice your body language. Ask yourself: "What is my body communicating, and how am I demonstrating that I'm listening?"
- Create a safe base. A place in the house where your child can choose to go when they want comfort. Place a pillow, blanket, and stuffed animal there. Play act using it. *"I am getting red in the face. I'm hot. I feel angry. I'm going to my safe base to calm down."*
- Narrate your feelings. As you are going through your bedtime routine, talk about what you are doing each step of the way. Involve your child by asking questions. For example, you might say, *"I just yawned and am feeling sleepy."*

**Trap** Never command your child to go to their safe base when they are upset. Instead, gently remind, *"Would your safe base help you feel better?"* Offer it as a free choice. If you tell them to go there, it takes away their ownership and your child does not have the opportunity to practice and internalize the self-management skill the experience has the opportunity to build.

### Step 3. Practice to Grow Listening Skills for Healthy Relationships

- Engage in listening activities together like listening to a simple audio book or a song and then reflecting on what you heard together. *"I heard a drum."*
- Recognize effort by using "I notice..." statements like, *"I noticed how you listened to my direction to stay on the driveway. That keeps you safe."*
- There are a number of games and songs that require strong listening skills. Offer practice by playing these games with your child.
  - *Hide and Seek* is a favorite child game as they try and figure where you've hid or they hide from you. This also exercises turn-taking skills, which are essential to communication.
  - *Music Making*. Music requires listening particularly if you introduce it as a game. *"Let's dance or play along with our instruments."* Household pots, pans, and spoons can serve as ideal instruments with which to experiment.
- Read together. When you read stories together, you engage in a listening activity that can be deeply connecting for both of you. Involve your child in holding the book, turning pages, and predicting what will come next. Hold onto a page before turning it and ask, *"What do you think will happen next?"* Reflect on the story, and you'll take the learning opportunity one step further. *"Do you think Little Red Riding Hood was excited to go to Grandma's house?"*

## Step 4. **Support** Your Child’s Development and Success

- Learn about your child’s development. Being informed about your child’s developmental milestones offers you empathy and patience.
- Stay engaged. Working together on ideas for trying out new and different listening strategies can offer additional support and motivation for your child especially when communication becomes challenging.
- Engage in further practice. Play listening games to reinforce skills such as *“Let’s see if you can name all of the sounds we hear when we go outside!”*
- Apply logical consequences when needed. Logical consequences should follow soon after the behavior and need to be provided in a way that maintains a healthy relationship. Rather than punishment, a consequence is about supporting the learning process.

**Trap** When your child does not listen to you or is clearly focusing elsewhere, you might be tempted to scold or nag but be sure and give them additional chances. We all lose our focus sometimes. Get down on their level, eye to eye, and review what you said again to help them refocus their attention. End with a smile or hug to reinforce your connection.

## Step 5. **Recognize** Effort and Quality to Foster Motivation

- Recognize and call out when all is going well. When your child is listening and following your instructions, call it out: *“I notice you listened when I asked you to back away from the street. I know you’re curious. We’ll hold hands, look both ways, and go together. I am glad you are keeping safe.”*
- Recognize and praise small steps along the way. Find small ways your child is making an effort and let them know you see them. *“You looked up at me when I called your name. I like seeing that!”* or *“That was very kind of you when you gave me a hug when I bumped my toe on the step.”*
- Build celebrations into your everyday routines. Promote joy and happiness by laughing, singing, dancing, hugging, and snuggling to appreciate one another.

## References

1. Harvard University Center on the Developing Child. (2019). *How To: 5 Steps for Brain-Building Serve and Return* [video]. Retrieved from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/how-to-5-steps-for-brain-building-serve-and-return/>

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