



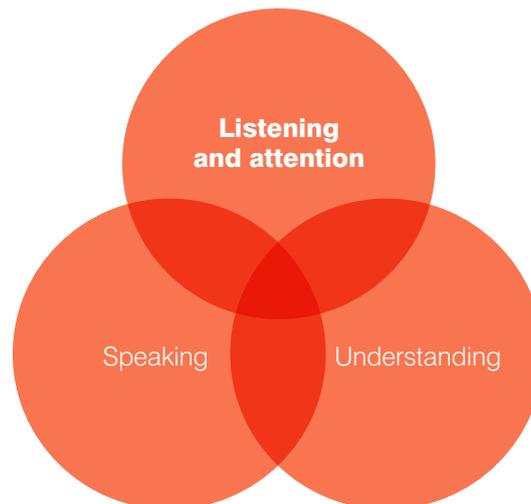
Communication and Language: Listening and attention

Introduction

Communication and Language (CL) is one of the **three prime areas** of learning and development in the EYFS framework. The other two are Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED) and Physical Development (PD). These areas are called prime because they form the foundation for all other aspects of young children's learning and development. As soon as they are born, young babies begin to communicate with other people – start to build relationships with their immediate family and care givers and interact physically with the world around them. The three prime areas of learning are regarded as particularly important for engaging young children's curiosity and enthusiasm, laying the foundations of success in learning and in life.

Communication and language development involves giving children opportunities to speak and listen in a range of situations, and to develop their confidence and skills in expressing themselves.

In the EYFS **Communication and Language** consists of three aspects:



The importance of these three aspects has been established from the Every Child a Talker (ECAT) programme. By focusing on listening and attention, and separating receptive language (understanding) from expressive language (speaking), practitioners can gain a better understanding of how language develops, how to support the process, and how to identify children who could be at risk from language delay.

Prime and specific areas of learning

The **three prime areas** of the EYFS should be the focus for practitioners working with the youngest children, as they form the basis for successful learning and progress in the **four specific areas**.

As children become older, the emphasis will shift towards a more equal focus on **all areas of learning** as children's confidence and abilities increase.

If at any time a child's progress within any of the prime areas gives cause for concern, practitioners should discuss this with the child's parents and provide focused support in that area. This approach is designed to ensure that any issues are addressed at an early stage of a child's life.

The importance of developing listening and attention skills

Listening and attention covers the aspect of the original EYFS framework called 'Language for Communication'. The change in emphasis in the new framework builds on findings from the ECAT programme about the best way for practitioners to support language development.

The ability to focus attention is a developmental stage vital to the whole process of acquiring language. Practitioners can support young children's language development by providing a wide variety of opportunities for them to focus their attention and to listen carefully. These are skills which will support all aspects of their learning and development, including the phonetic and phonemic awareness which underpin reading and writing.

Progress in CL: Listening and attention

24-36 months

Children listen with interest when adults read stories to them. They recognise and respond to many familiar sounds e.g. turning to a knock on the door, looking at or going to the door. They can shift attention to a different task if their attention is fully obtained.

36-48 months

Children listen to others one-to-one or in small groups when the conversation interests them. They join in repeated refrains and anticipate key events and phrases in rhymes and stories. They can focus attention by shifting between an activity and listening.

Early Learning Goal

Children listen attentively in a range of situations. They listen to stories, accurately anticipating key events and respond to what they hear with relevant comments, questions or actions. They give their attention to what others say and respond appropriately, while engaged in another activity.

[Statements from Draft EYFS Framework, 2011]

The relationship between Communication and Language and the other prime areas of learning

'Communication and Language supports Personal, Social and Emotional Development because a child who can communicate feelings, needs and ideas develops a strong sense of self and is increasingly able to relate to others in rewarding and appropriate ways. It supports Physical Development through description of actions which increase conscious control and through talk about health and the factors which influence this.'

[Tickell Review of the EYFS, 2011]

Summary of development for two-year-olds

When a child is aged between 24 and 36 months, practitioners must review progress in Communication and Language, along with the other two prime areas of learning. Parents or carers should be given a short written summary of their child's development as part of the ongoing dialogue between the setting and the family. This summary should identify any areas where the child's progress is less than expected and should shape a targeted plan to support that child's future learning and development in the setting.

There will be no standard format for this developmental summary, instead it should reflect the culture and ethos of the setting and the particular needs of the child and/or parental preferences.

What quality looks like in practice

The three scenarios described below provide a snapshot of practice in a children's centre which provides a wide range of 'drop in' sessions as well as full day care for children from six months to five years of age.

Under twos

In the baby room the walls and furnishings have been kept neutral so the children are not overwhelmed by a riot of bright colours. Practitioners prefer using natural and household resources for the babies to play with, rather than plastic toys.

The atmosphere in the room is calm and reassuring without the distraction of a lot of background noise. Practitioners sit on the floor and interact with the babies, noticing what they are interested in and helping them to engage with the wide range of interesting resources and explore them using all their senses. For the non-mobile babies there are Treasure Baskets to explore and practitioners regularly set aside time for individual children to explore these collections without interruption.

The toddlers enjoy heuristic play sessions when they can explore a wide range of open ended resources, finding out how the different things behave and what they can do with them. Again, practitioners allow uninterrupted time for these activities and manage the sessions to give individual children the opportunity to focus on and follow their own interests.

Two- to three-year-olds

The environment is resourced with a wide range of interesting things for the children to play with and explore. Mirrors are widely used throughout the setting to engage children's attention and to encourage them to look more closely. There are mirrors at child level in the corner of the room and mirror tiles are often used to draw attention to interesting objects.

The pattern of the day includes quiet, reflective times as well as noisy, boisterous times. Practitioners take time to have conversations with children, either individually or in small groups, and model the skills of listening and paying attention. They encourage the children to listen out for everyday sounds – a knock at the door, a bell ringing, a radio playing or a baby crying – and make up stories together that incorporate these sounds. When playing out of doors with the children, practitioners play *Stop! Listen!* games which encourage children to pause and pay attention to what they can hear in the environment around them.

At drop-in sessions practitioners model listening skills to children and share with parents how important being able to focus attention is to helping children to become effective communicators. They tackle issues such as background noise from a TV or radio, thinking about how this can distract a child's and make listening difficult.

Four- to five-year-olds

Resources are stored around the room where children can access them easily, though practitioners try not to overwhelm the environment with too much vibrant colour. Table covers used for 'messy activities' are plain rather than patterned, giving children more opportunity to focus on the resources they are using.

Children are encouraged to explore using all their senses, not just by looking or touching. Finding out 'what things sound like' is as valuable as what they look like, feel like or smell like. To reinforce this they play an intriguing game involving a stethoscope and a range of different fabrics and objects to 'listen to'. The stethoscope is placed on the material and gently moved backwards and forwards to discover that bubble plastic, paper, corrugated cardboard, shiny fabric, aluminium foil, wood and brick all sound very different from one another. The children then make up their own words to describe the sounds they can hear.

At the beginning of the day children and adults sit together and plan the outline of what will happen during the session. This is an opportunity for adults to show how to listen carefully and to pay attention to what someone has to say. Practitioners spend time making sure they have children's attention when speaking to them, and try to be as clear as possible when making comments or giving instructions. Story time and music sessions are great opportunities for children to enjoy nursery rhymes and songs, building up their ability to anticipate and join in with familiar refrains and actions.

How to support young children in developing their listening and attention skills

Use these reflective questions to think about how you might help young children to develop their listening and attention skills.

Under twos

- What could we do to make the baby room a quieter, calmer place?
- Do we need to extend our range of resources so there are more interesting things to engage the babies' attention?
- Are there ways we could improve how we use Treasure Baskets so babies have more time and opportunity to focus and concentrate?
- How well do we use different types of music as a way of encouraging babies to listen and respond?
- As practitioners, do we all fully understand the importance of having conversations with very young babies?
- Could we create more comfortable spaces for children and adults to engage in conversation – indoors and out of doors?
- How could we extend our knowledge of how young children acquire communication and language skills?
- Are there any practical ways in which we could help parents understand the importance of listening and paying attention as a basis for language development?

Two- to three-year-olds

- How aware are we of the amount of background noise in our setting and are there ways we could minimise this?
- How well do we use opportunities to draw children's attention to sounds in the environment – indoors and out of doors?
- Should we make more use of mirrors to create interesting, engaging small environments for children to explore?
- Does the organisation of the day encourage children to focus their attention rather than 'flitting' from one activity to another?
- Should we be making better use of story times to help children build up their listening skills?
- Could we be more creative in how we use music to encourage listening?
- How do we know which children find it difficult to listen and focus their attention and do we have strategies to address this?
- What more could we do to share information with parents about the importance of children developing their listening and attention focusing skills?

Four- to five-year-olds

- How could we change our environment to help children to focus more easily on what they are doing?
- How could we provide more interesting resources and opportunities for multisensory exploration?
- Should the pattern of the day include more times for conversations with individual children or in small groups?
- Are there enough welcoming places, inside and outside, where conversations can take place?
- How could we make better use of story time as an opportunity to develop children's listening skills?
- Do we always give children enough time to become involved in activities that interest them?
- Do we always act as good role models for listening and paying attention rather than trying to do several things at once?
- How well do we encourage children to use their listening skills out of doors – in different environments and at different times of day?

Ideas for parents

Communication and Language

Communication and Language covers the three different aspects of how young children's language skills develop:

- **Listening and attention** – children tuning in to what they can hear and listening carefully. This is how children learn to distinguish between different sounds as a build up to learning how to read and write.
- **Speaking** – how children use words to express their needs, ideas and feelings and as a way of sharing what they are thinking with other people. Children need lots of opportunities to talk before they will be ready to communicate through writing.
- **Understanding** – how children make sense of spoken language, starting with simple short sentences and building up to more complex questions and sentences.

To develop their communication and language skills, children need to learn: how to listen and pay attention; how to speak; how to make sense of what they hear. These are all important skills that children are practising from the moment they are born, long before they can speak.

Helping your child to develop their listening skills

There are lots of easy ways you can help your child to learn how to listen and pay attention. These will all help them to build up the skills they require to talk about what they need, how they are feeling, and what they are interested in.

You could use the ideas below as starting points to help you do this.

Under twos

- Talk to your baby and give her time to reply.
- You could show you are listening by turning your head a little and having an interested look on your face.
- Try not to have too much noise in the background – from a TV or radio, for example.
- Read simple stories to your baby with interesting pictures to look at.
- Play different types of music for your baby to listen to.
- You could make up a collection of shiny things or things made of wood for your baby to explore.
- Toddlers often spend lots of time putting things in bags, stacking things up and moving things around.

Two- to three-year-olds

- Notice what your child is interested in and encourage him to stay focused on things he enjoys doing.
- Try occasionally just having a few things out to play with so there is less to distract him.
- Sing nursery rhymes and encourage him to listen and join in with the words he knows.
- Make story reading into a 'performance' by using lots of different voices.
- At quiet times of the day listen together to the sounds you can hear around the house.
- Out on a walk listen together for the sounds of birds singing, dogs barking or the traffic roaring.
- Be a good role model by looking at your child when he's talking and listening to what he has to say.

Four- to five-year-olds

- Play guessing games that involve listening to and trying to name different sounds.
- When your child is busy doing something, try to make sure she is not interrupted.
- When you are doing 'messy activities' it is easier to focus on what you are doing if the table cover is a plain colour.
- When reading stories your child knows well, encourage her to listen out for and say what comes next.
- Singing nursery rhymes and doing action songs together encourages listening and speaking.
- Encourage your child to make up their own words to describe different sounds they can hear.
- Listening to different types of music develops listening skills and can be very relaxing.