

# The Look of Listening

## Like Children, Like Bunnies? By Paul Madaule

**O** imagine a rabbit in a meadow on a quiet evening; its posture is rounded; the ears are down. Suddenly a branch cracks nearby. Both its body and ears perk up. At first, the rabbit was hearing; now it is listening! The rabbit illustrates that not only the ear but also the whole body are involved in the act of listening.

While rabbits, dogs, cats and many mammals illustrate quite graphically what listening 'looks like', this look is not as obvious in humans. The general impression is that, unlike in vision, where one clearly knows if a person looks at you or not, listening is not 'visible'. However, seasoned educators know at first glance who is listening and who is 'not in the classroom'. They may or may not be aware of it, but this is how they recognize the 'look' of listening.

### From Bunnies to Kiddies

Posture. Observe a child who is listening to a storyteller and totally absorbed by the fairytale. His posture looks very much like the rabbit when it is perking up. The child's body conveys openness, presence and alertness. By contrast, a child with a slouching posture with the back and shoulders constantly hunched

shows that he is not listening. We know that asking a child to sit straight is like talking to a deaf ear. Within a minute or so, he will be all deflated again. His body image, which is the mental representation of his body, is poorly developed, an indication that his vestibular and proprioceptive systems (which we call the 'ear of the body') are not sending enough messages to the brain, resulting in low muscle tone and poor body awareness. The weight of gravity makes him feel heavier than he is; he is literally crushed. Any physical activity, starting

with sitting straight, requires tremendous effort which quickly drains his energy and sucks the zest for life out of him as well as his desire to do things and to explore. His 'ear of the body' is not fit to listen.

Issues related to low energy such as poor motivation, boredom, slow response, short attention span and concentration are commonly observed when the ear of the body is not working well. Inability to stand still and fidgety behavior are even further wasting what little energy he has left. Eye Contact. Unlike the rabbit, a child doesn't perk up her ears when she listens. Our ears move but it is hardly noticeable because our 'perking up' mechanism is buried well inside the middle ear, behind the





eardrum. There is, however, an easy and straight forward way to find out if a child is listening:

Eye contact.

The quality of eye contact is the very first change that we observe at the beginning of the listening training program. For example with autistic children, eye contact, which was virtually non-existent, suddenly becomes noticeable. More often, the child's eyes 'fill up' with sparks as if to convey 'I am here now', 'I am with you', 'got it!' triggering comments from the parents or teachers such as "he looks smarter" or "she is so much a part of our life now!". The link between eye contact and listening is so striking that eye contact truly is 'listening with the eyes'. To

be sure that the child is listening to you when you talk, make sure that she is looking at your eyes and not at your lips. Lip reading is an attempt to process speech when listening is not working properly. It can also be an indicator of an attempt to compensate for a partial hearing loss.

Saying that eye contact is the child's equivalent of the rabbit's perked up ears is not just a metaphor; it corresponds to a neuro-physiological reality which has tremendous consequences on our ability to read and write. There are links between the vestibular system of the inner ear, the cerebellum (this part of the brain specialized in the control of fine movements) and the ocular nerves of the eyes which are responsible for tracking. Our daily observation at The Listening Centre of children who spontaneously and effortlessly start reading better as the result of a listening training is a constant reminder of this link between the ear and the eye. In listening, as well as reading, the eye becomes an extension of the ear.

Facial Expression.

Another sign of listening that the experienced teacher's



quick glance over his class won't miss is facial expression. A 'blank' stare, a set smile, a slightly open mouth, are sure signs that the child is not listening. A good listener's face looks thoughtful and engaged as if the facial muscles were actively involved in absorbing the message. As the matter of fact, they are actively involved! There are two muscles in the middle ear which play a part in the 'perking up' mechanism I was referring to before. We can call them the 'listening muscles'. One of these muscles is controlled by the facial nerve, which, as its name indicates, also controls the muscles of the face and lips. This is the link between the ear and facial expression. When a child looks too serious while listening, or when his face gets distorted by a grin, these are signs that he is trying hard to compensate for a listening

function which is failing him. I have seen children working so hard at it that they develop wrinkles on the forehead way too prematurely.

The other listening muscle is controlled by the trigeminal nerve which is also involved in the opening and closing of the mouth. The most graphic expression of non-listening is yawning, which often happens when we tell a child something she doesn't want to hear. Do some teenagers come to mind?

## The Sound of Listening

Talking. Listening doesn't only have a 'look', it does have a sound as well, the sound of the voice. Being the first listener of what we say, the way we talk is a reflection of how we listen. Therefore, in order to know the sound of your child's listening, just listen to her voice when she talks. If it is rich in timbre, clearly articulated, with good intonation, her listening is fine! As a general rule, speech

clarity and rich vocabulary speaks for a proper functioning of the auditory ear while speech flow and sentence structure (syntax) give indications on the functioning of the ear of the body.

A poor listener's voice may take many forms. It may sound flat, monotone, choppy, hard to understand, with little expression, lots of hesitations and repeats, poor vocabulary, unelaborated sentence structure. It also may be riddled with ready-made filler phrases such as 'stuff like that', 'you know what I mean', 'and so on and so on'. In trying to compensate for a listening deficit, she may concentrate all her energy formulating what she wants to say, attempting to find the words, hesitating, losing her train of thought and soon giving up, exhausted and frustrated. Another child may opt for talking 'for talking sake' at the expense of content. His sentences may be convoluted and stuffed with generalizations, leaving you with the impression of a lot of words to say little. As a rule, when talking, a poor listener has a hard time handling both formulation and content at the same time.

#### Singing.

Singing comes naturally to young children because it suits their spontaneous nature and sense of playfulness. At a deeper level, singing is an answer for their need to express emotions and affect. It is pre-language for children to use before they know how to put their thoughts into words and phrases. This is why singing is the perfect catalyst for language acquisition. From the perspective of listening, singing works on the fine tuning of intonation, rhythm and articulation, all ingredients which make up speech.

The singing voice of a good listener should be clear, colorful, in beat and melodious. However, don't panic if your child tends to sing slightly – and delightfully – out of tune. This is normal since auditory discrimination is not fully mastered until 5 or 6 years old.

Singing offers the child the very best natural listening training. This is why it plays such an important part in our work at The Listening Centre. This is also why singing activities should be paramount in early education. Children need to sing!

#### Playing Music.

Many musicians will tell you that they didn't choose the instrument they play, they were chosen by it. It is as if early on in life, their listening ear was already attuned to the specific sounds of the instrument a sort of sound chemistry which determined the choice. If she chose a clarinet, it is likely that her listening 'sounds like' a clarinet. If your child shows an affinity for, let's say, the saxophone, go for it even

if there is a piano at home and a piano teacher next door. Not all children may be as clear in their choice. If this is the case, let him explore a variety of instruments and go with his pick. If none turn him on and he keeps going back to the soccer ball, do not insist. Not all of us have a 'musician within', or, more to the point, a natural musical ear.

## Listening Beyond the Visible

Constantly asking for repetition, responding after a lengthy time delay, having a tough time with multiple instructions while it is clear that hearing is within normal range, are also many signs that listening is not up to the task. Many facets of listening are difficult to detect because we do not realize that listening is at the root of skills as diverse as focus and attention span, auditory processing, phonological awareness, motor functions, co-ordination, organizational skills, reading, writing as well as regulation of energy.

A listening checklist on the next page can help parents and teachers identify possible listening issues. In my next article, I will make some suggestions on what can be done to maximize your child's listening. I will also describe "Listening Fitness", a user-friendly program that we have devised to help children's listening skills in the school.

*Paul Madaule, a French-trained psychologist, is director of The Listening Centre in Toronto. He is the author of "When Listening Comes Alive" and numerous articles on the application of listening training. (see [www.listeningcentre.com](http://www.listeningcentre.com)). Mr. Madaule also developed Listening Fitness, an education-oriented skill-enhancement method (see [www.listeningfitness.com](http://www.listeningfitness.com)).*

# Listening Checklist

This checklist offers a catalogue of skills and behaviours that will enable you to assess the main aspects of your child's listening.

There is no score, simply check as many boxes as you feel appropriate.

## Receptive Listening

This is the listening that is directed outward. It keeps us attuned to the world around us, to what's going on at home, at work or in the classroom.

- ☐ short attention span
- ☐ distractibility
- ☐ oversensitivity to sounds
- ☐ misinterpretation of questions
- ☐ confusion of similar sounding words
- ☐ frequent need of repetition
- ☐ inability to follow sequential instructions

## Expressive Listening

This is listening that is directed within. We use it to control our voice when we speak and sing and our eyes when we read or write.

- ☐ flat and monotonous voice
- ☐ hesitant speech
- ☐ weak vocabulary
- ☐ poor sentence structure
- ☐ overuse of stereotyped expressions
- ☐ inability to sing in tune
- ☐ confusion or reversal of letters
- ☐ poor reading comprehension
- ☐ poor reading aloud
- ☐ poor spelling

## Motor Skills

The ear of the body, which controls balance, co-ordination and body image, also needs close attention.

- ☐ poor posture
- ☐ fidgety behaviour
- ☐ clumsy, uncoordinated movement
- ☐ poor sense of rhythm
- ☐ messy handwriting
- ☐ hard time with organization, structure
- ☐ confusion of left and right
- ☐ mixed dominance
- ☐ poor sport skills

## Protection Issues

Listening is also the ability to leave out, or protect ourselves from "noise", the information we don't need. Difficulty at that level is often related to behavioral and social adjustment problems.

- ☐ oversensitivity to sound
- ☐ startles easily
- ☐ low tolerance to frustration
- ☐ poor self-confidence
- ☐ poor self-image
- ☐ difficulty making friends
- ☐ tendency to withdraw, avoid others
- ☐ irritability
- ☐ immaturity
- ☐ negative attitude toward school/work

## The Level of Energy

The sensory system, and the ear in particular, are most instrumental in providing and regulating the energy we need to lead harmonious and fulfilling lives.

- ☐ difficulty getting up
- ☐ tiredness at the end of the day
- ☐ habit of procrastinating
- ☐ hyperactivity
- ☐ tendency toward depression
- ☐ feeling overburdened with everyday tasks
- ☐ low motivation, lack of drive

## Developmental History

This knowledge is extremely important in early identification and prevention of listening problems. It also sheds light on the possible causes.

- ☐ a stressful pregnancy
- ☐ difficult birth
- ☐ adoption
- ☐ early separation from the mother
- ☐ delay in motor development
- ☐ recurring ear infections

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