

How to Teach Active Listening

Physical Awareness:

Proximity: You may need to teach kids the art of proximity when conversing with peers or adults. This includes understanding personal space, reading body language, and being aware of their own body language.

Activity:

- Have kids stand across from a peer at least six feet apart.
- Have them gradually take a step towards each other, one at a time, until they feel that the amount of personal space left is uncomfortable.

Discussion:

- What did you notice about the amount of space required to make you feel comfortable while communicating?
- How did it feel when your partner went beyond your personal space?
- Did everyone have the same comfort levels in regards to personal space?
- What can you do to respect the personal space of others? What signs can you look for to determine if you are too close or too far away from a communication partner?
- What factors may play a part in determining how much personal space is required for comfort? (i.e who you are talking to, age of the communication partner, gender of the communication partner, etc).

Body Language: This includes non-verbal communication such as eye contact, how someone is standing, holding their arms, and more. A simple way to bring awareness to this is through the use of pictures.

Activities:

- Present a variety of images that includes people in different positions with different expressions.
- Have students assess or predict what that person in the picture is communicating. (i.e Are they bored because they have their arms crossed and are looking away? Are they in a hurry to go because they are looking at their watch? Are they annoyed or frustrated because they are rolling their eyes?)

Discussion:

- How can you show someone that you are interested in what they are saying?
- What behaviors may communicate that you are not engaged in a conversation?
- What can you do if someone is demonstrating nonverbal signs that they are not interested in your conversation? (i.e change topic by asking them a question about themselves, wrap up thoughts and transition out of a conversation, etc)

Listening:

Suspending activities physically and mentally: In order to be present to our listener we need to make sure we stop what we are doing to actually listen to them. This calls on us to also be mindful of our thoughts so we can focus on our conversational partner's words.

Activities:

- Practice listening to key words or phrases either in classroom dialogue or songs. Have students identify and tally up how many times they heard the given word or phrase.
- Have students pair up. Give one partner a picture. The other partner has a blank piece of paper. The student with the picture must describe the picture as the other student attempts to draw it based off of the description provided.
- Practice periods of mindfulness. This is helping students get comfortable with stillness of body and mind. This can be done through periods of class silence, as students sit quietly just focusing on their breathing or the sounds they are hearing in their surroundings. This can be guided as well, using one of the many mindfulness apps out there.

Paraphrasing: This skill contains the art of letting listeners know you understand what they are attempting to communicate. Paraphrasing is a way to summarize what you have heard to ensure that you are correctly understanding the content.

Activities:

- This is a great skill to explore during literature time. Have students practice paraphrasing dialogue from a story the class is reading.
- This can also be built in and modeled during classroom conversations. After a student responds to a question or topic, have another student paraphrase what their peer has just said.
- Make connections with words and emotions. Inferring how someone may be feeling through reading nonverbal cues and listening to their words is essential for active listening. Have students practice this skill both within content time (through interactions with text and instructional conversations) as well as during classroom discussions.

Ask Questions (Clarifying or Exploratory): Questions show our conversational partner that we are interested in what they are saying. It also helps to better understand him or her by clearing up any misconceptions and providing more detail.

Activities:

- “I want to know more.” This is an activity that requires students to listen to their partner speak about a given topic or a topic of their choice. I usually set a timer for two minutes. When the time goes off the listening partner has to ask a clarifying question and a question that seeks more information. The speaking partner will provide feedback to the listener on the following criteria: were the questions on topic, did they make sense, and did they add to the quality of the conversational exchange.
- Model during classroom discussions. When engaging in discussions with students pause and ask them clarifying or exploratory questions. I encourage you to use the vocabulary as well to draw their attention to this skill. When organically possible, respond with sentence starters such as, “Can I ask a clarifying question?” or “I would love to know more about...”

Conversation Busters

- Stay on Topic!
- Avoid “Me, Me, Me” talk.
- Refrain from judgement and advice. If you are compelled to give advice ask if they want it before offering it.
- Do not cut your partner off or finish his or her sentences.
- Do not leave prior to a person finishing their thought, unless you politely excuse yourself with reason.

Active Listening Checklist

- ✓ Respect personal physical boundaries, giving space to your conversational partner.
- ✓ Be aware of your body language to ensure that your communication partner knows you are interested in what they have to say. (i.e Notice how your arms and hands are being held, make sure you are facing your partner, and provide as much eye contact as comfortable)
- ✓ Stop what you are doing or thinking. No multitasking.
- ✓ Listen and paraphrase words and emotions.
- ✓ Ask clarifying questions to get more information or make sure you are understanding correctly.
- ✓ Stay on topic. Avoid “wandering off” comments or changing the conversation to be about yourself.
- ✓ Avoid judgement or telling others what to think, feel, or do. Instead ask your conversational partner what they need or how you can help. Most times people just want to be heard and understood.
- ✓ Exit appropriately. Thank your conversational partner or communicate that you appreciate the time you have shared talking. Example phrases include:
 - “It was good talking to you.”
 - “Thanks for talking today.”
 - “It was good to hear from you. Let’s talk again soon.”