

Listening Difficulties – ideas and solutions

Information for parents/carers and teachers

Making the classroom a better place to listen and learn

This section provides suggestions for improving classroom acoustics, which range from inexpensive to expensive.

Problem	Free or low cost solution	Creative solution	Expensive solution
Background (ambient) noise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Close doors to corridors/hall etc • Get heating systems checked so that they don't make unnecessary noise • Plastic trays/pencil boxes etc: Pad with foam or felt/ put soft pads on the base • Everyone wear indoor shoes in class • Teach pupils how to value quiet • Turn off computers/printers when not in use • Close windows to outdoor noise • Position bookshelves and display boards against thin partition walls. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build acoustic partition walls or add doors in open plan buildings • Replace poorly fitting or light weight internal doors • Line partition curtains with acoustic fabric • Consider a classroom sound-field system (but remember, acoustics must be reasonable in the first place!) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replacement windows - double or triple glazed depending on how intrusive outside environmental noise is. • Remember, we become used to background noise and, as adults, can shut it out. Children can't. We only realise how intrusive noise is once it stops!
Reverberation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use display drapes on walls • Angle display boards downwards by allowing a gap from the wall at the top of up to 10cm • Create a quiet area with bean bags and cushions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fit vertical blinds to windows (better than curtains that are rarely drawn) • Carpet the floors! • Fit acoustic panels above display boards in rooms with high ceilings • Fit thick acoustic ceiling tiles over plaster ceilings. Thin ones are almost useless! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower the ceilings and fit thick acoustic tiles.

Distance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure children with hearing or listening problems are appropriately seated near the front to the side of the room so that they can see you and swivel easily to see classmates during discussions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If FM (radio aid) has been provided, make sure it is used properly, consistently and is well maintained. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rebuild or rearrange classrooms to better accommodate children with hearing difficulties.
----------	--	--	---

Suggestions for teachers

This section provides practical suggestions for teachers in managing children with **listening difficulties** in the classroom.

Provide preferential seating. Seat the student near the primary sound source. Allow flexibility in seating to achieve the preferential seating advantage. The middle of the class towards the front is a possibility or the front and to the side favoured by the teacher for main instruction giving. This enables the student to access both visual and auditory information more easily and turn to see peers during discussions.

- Avoid seating near noise sources. Place the student away from competing or distracting noise sources such as outside noise or equipment in the classroom.
- Acoustical modifications may be considered to create a good acoustical listening and learning environment (e.g., carpeting, curtains, and other sound absorbing materials).
- Speak in a clear, well-modulated voice. Be careful not to over-articulate.
- Discuss the difference between listening (active process) and hearing (a more passive process) - 'I can hear but that doesn't mean I'm listening'. Explain how to be a good listener.
- Try not to talk when your face is not visible to the class or your back is to the class, i.e. when writing on a board or looking down.
- Reduce distractions, both auditory and visual.
- Encourage the student to ask for clarification.
- If using a personal or sound-field FM system, make sure that it is working before starting the lesson and position the microphone appropriately. Remember to 'mute' the system when speaking individually to another child or teacher.
- Gain attention before giving instructions and regularly check for attention.
- Frequently paraphrase or summarise key points.
- Encourage self-monitoring and self-regulation.
- Give positive feedback.

Activities to minimise the effects of listening difficulties (at home and school)

This section provides practical activities to minimise the effects of **listening difficulties**. These activities are easily integrated into daily activities and interactions. These activities and games should be enjoyable! There are many more that you will know! Do them 1:1 or in small groups at school or as family games at home. These games can be adapted to suit different age groups. I have, for example,

adapted the "silly sentences" game for use with high school students by using set texts from Shakespeare.

- Listening for "same" or "different" sounds - such auditory training games may already be used in school.
- Listening for "Silly Sentences" and missed words in familiar rhymes or stories.
- Auditory sequencing / memory games such as "I went to the shops and I bought....."
- "Simon Says..." But give more complex 3 or 4 element instructions. If they find this difficult, reduce the number of elements.
- Gradually increase the number of elements in an instruction; "go upstairs, look in the airing cupboard and bring down the red bath towel and a white hand towel....."
- Auditory discrimination activities such as 'I went to the shop and bought.....'
 - One family member starts by saying, 'I went to the shops today and bought...' something beginning with A (e.g. apple).
 - The next person continues by saying the previous item (apple) and then something beginning with B (e.g. banana).
 - Continue around the family, working through the alphabet, adding one more item to the end of the list each time.
 - It is great for memory, concentration and listening skills and keeps everyone interested!
 - For younger children it is a game that can be suggested to the child's teacher to play at school.
- Play mime games such as "charades" to develop attention and the ability to read visual clues.
- Pass on the message - first in quiet, then introduce background noise and other distractions. Increase the complexity of the "message" gradually.
- Copy that tune! Repeat a simple tapped rhythm or riff (musical phrase), if the child plays a musical instrument.
- Find that noise! Sound location games with eyes closed.
- Listen to audio books and follow the words.
- Make colourful mind maps for revision.

It is easier to remember our own voice! Suggest they make their own "Teach Yourself" audio/visual aids. For example, learn a topic, then "teach it to yourself" by explaining the topic onto a CD or tape. Some older students have enjoyed filming themselves delivering a lesson on their mobile phones. They then listen/watch back and note anything they have missed.

Strategies to minimise the effects of listening difficulties (primary schools)

This section provides practical suggestions for teachers to minimise the effects of **listening difficulties** in primary school-age children.

- Acknowledge the problem! Reassure the child that listening is difficult, but there are things you are going to try that will help.
- Consider a trial of an assisted listening device.
- Seek advice on improving existing listening conditions.
- Seat the child close to the teacher so that distance and "noise" does not interfere with their ability to listen to speech effectively.
- Encourage the child to watch and listen so that they have visual as well as auditory clues, so provide visual aids and prompts.
- When addressing the child use their name first so that you gain their attention before speaking or giving an instruction.
- The child's auditory memory is probably weak. The first part of an instruction may be heard, but not the rest. "Chunk" information/instructions. Give written directions to which the child can refer. Praise each completed stage.
- Give time to process what is heard (thinking time) without prompting straight away.
- Consider delivering spoken tests - particularly mental maths - at a slower pace - i.e. 10 seconds instead of 5 seconds per question. Perhaps the child could be part of a small group with a teaching assistant out of the main classroom to minimise feelings of isolation and being "different".
- Give the child the opportunity to work in a quiet environment where possible - perhaps with a small group and an assistant.
- The level of concentration needed to keep up in order to listen effectively will be high and it will need to be sustained. Greater than average effort is required. This is exhausting and the child may "switch off" and daydream. Give "time out" in a quiet place if necessary/possible.
- Written instructions to support the verbal - but staff should also check the child's understanding of tasks.
- As the curriculum becomes more complex and demanding, guided use of a laptop computer will help organise and order thoughts and ideas more easily.
- Ask child discreetly to repeat back what they have been asked to do. This will build comprehension skills and ensure messages have been understood correctly.
- Give written instructions in clear bullet pointed steps.
- Some older students find it helpful to record the lesson for review later - teacher instruction parts only! This is especially useful when new information is being given.
- Teachers help by making it physically, visually, and audibly clear when they are about to begin something important.
- Revision - Some children find it easier to remember if they record their own voice as they revise, then listen back on headphones.

Teachers work in partnership with parents to prepare child for lessons - pre-teach new vocabulary, remind them what has been learned before. This will help the child to feel more secure and confident.

Strategies to minimise the effects of listening difficulties (high school and beyond)

This section provides practical suggestions for teachers to minimise the effects of **listening difficulties** in high school children and could also be adapted for university students.

- Acknowledge the problem! Reassure the student that listening is difficult, but there are things you are going to try that will help.
- Consider a trial of an assisted listening device
- Seek advice on improving existing listening conditions
- Written instructions to support the verbal - but staff should also check student's understanding - this will be particularly important in examinations and tests.
- If possible, a written lesson outline and glossaries of terms in advance of the lesson so that the student knows what to expect and is "cued in" to the topic. If in-class learning support is available, then note taking by a learning assistant will enable them to check the accuracy of their own notes and also allow them to concentrate on what the teacher is saying, rather than split attention from listening to writing. If this is not possible, perhaps photocopies of notes taken by a reliable fellow student could be organised.
- Consider specific training to develop note-taking skills. Picking out the salient points is often difficult.
- Use of a laptop computer to help with organising work, memory and planning.
- Encourage effective use of a diary and "To Do" lists to organise and remember life!
- Use memo/notes app on mobile phone.
- Encourage student to sit in the best possible place - this could be at the front and to the side so that it is easier to swivel from teacher to class and focus on speakers during discussions.
- Ask the student discreetly to repeat back what they have been asked to do. This will build comprehension skills and ensure messages have been understood correctly.
- Give the student the opportunity work in a quiet space if this helps.
- Give written instructions in clear bullet pointed steps.
- Some students find it helpful to record the lesson/lecture for review later. This is especially useful when new information is being given.
- Provide visual aids and prompts.
- Consider fitting acoustic screens.

Developing good listening skills

This section explains the difference between hearing and listening and shows how good listening skills can be taught.

Why develop good listening skills?

Listening is an important skill. We are required to process auditory information in most situations throughout the day. Most of the time we do this without thinking as adults but children acquire these skills over time.

Children with listening difficulties (and indeed all children) find it helpful to talk about what listening really is and how they can become better at listening.

Things to discuss and do

- **There is a difference between listening and hearing.** Listening is an active process which requires attention and understanding. Hearing is a more passive process. I can hear but that does not mean I am listening.

Activity: Think of times when you have heard but not really listened to something. Think of times that you have listened well. What did you do?

- **What do we do when we listen?** What do we do with our eyes, hands feet and our bodies? When we listen our bodies focus on listening - not only our ears. We sit still (relaxed position rather than stiff and uncomfortable), we look at the speaker, our hands and feet are still (we don't fidget or kick the table or play with our fingers). We actually listen with our whole bodies rather than just our ears. This is called 'whole-body' listening.
- **Discuss the different types of listening** (if the child is old enough to understand this):
 - preparatory attention choosing what to attend to
 - selective attention attending to target & blocking out competing stimuli
 - divided attention attending to two or more targets (attention shifting)
 - vigilance attending to an intermittent target
 - sustained attention maintaining attention to a target over time.
- **Identify a good listener/s.** What makes them a good listener? You can be a good listener too - it just takes a bit of practice.
- **Advantages of listening versus penalties of not listening.** Advantages of listening: know what is happening, feel part of things. Disadvantages of not listening: don't know what is happening, miss important information and don't feel part of things.
- **Identify more challenging listening conditions** (including noise and different accents). What can you do in these situations?
- **Experiencing not being listened to and evaluating others and own listening behaviour.** If you have established a good relationship and trust with a child, you can 'not listen' to something important they say and then discuss how this made them feel. Have the child evaluate your

listening behaviour in this situation and in general. Have them evaluate their own listening behaviour.

- **A good practical tip:** When working with a child it is helpful to have a picture of an owl (with big interesting eyes). Use a post-it note with the child's name and another with your name. Instead of saying 'Okay, I need you to listen and sit still and remember good listening skills' you can simply cover the owl's eyes with the post-it note with the child's name. This alerts them to their listening in a positive way. When listening improves remove the post-it note. Similarly should the child feel you are not listening they can place the post-it note with your name over the owl's eyes. This can also be done with a class where a blank post-it note is used when the teacher feels someone is not listening. This engages the specific child and makes the others check their listening too.
- **Reward good listening behaviour.** The most effective reward is not a star or token but positive verbal feedback, highlighting the advantages of good listening.

University and beyond! A few practical suggestions

This section provides some practical suggestions for individuals with **listening difficulties** who are making the adjustment to university/college after leaving school.

You will soon be beginning your course at university. Congratulations! You have already worked hard to overcome the problems caused by your listening difficulties at school. Most of these strategies will be equally helpful at college/university but here is a list to consider. At college/university, listening will be a prime source of information so use whatever helps and give your tutor/lecturers a copy so that they can support you.

- Keep in mind that what the speaker is saying is important to **you**. This may be obvious, but if you don't have an immediate reason for listening, you'll be unmotivated and less likely to listen effectively.
- Take responsibility for what is being said. The responsibility for interest and understanding lies with you, not the lecturer. Learning will be up to you, so continue to be an active listener, not a passive one. Then you'll be a successful student.
- If you can't hear, arrange things so you can. Move away from whatever noise is distracting you - anything that is mechanical or human! Sit where you can see the lecturer clearly so that you can use your lip-reading skills and distractions are reduced.
- Continue to listen to what the speaker (could be another student) is saying. Don't tune out because you don't think it is relevant. Be sure you understand before you reject.
- Look for the main idea/s of a presentation. Facts are important as they support the speaker's points. If you have a problem distinguishing between trivial 'throw-away' remarks and the important points, seek advice from your tutor or support centre.
- Become familiar with a lecturer's style and organisation of lectures. In a lecture, the speaker is usually referring to notes or a presentation. You'll be able to understand much better if you are aware of the ultimate goals of the topic/lecture and how the lecturer will get there! Don't be afraid to ask for a brief order/synopsis of the lecture in advance. Try to familiarise yourself with new vocabulary/terminology in advance.
- Try not to let your mind wander! It's easy to allow your thoughts to stray - especially if you have a lot on, so try to make a deliberate effort to stay on track and your concentration span will increase. This is a **really** valuable skill so practice the skill of **attention** and you'll soon find it (and the work) much easier.
- Take notes while you listen. This is active listening (see second point). If you are given lecture notes, scribble your own notes on them as you listen. Use different colours to categorise – anything that will jog your memory when you refer to the notes later on.

References

P.Grant. Harrow Advisory Teachers of the Deaf, 2009
N. Campbell, ISVR, University of Southampton, 2010

