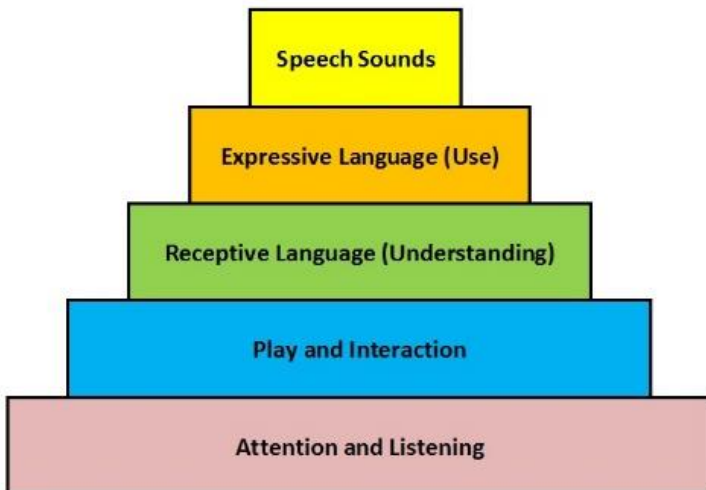


Tip of the Month September 2016

Attention and Listening

By Fern Jones (SLT)

Attention and listening skills are some of the foundation skills to developing good language skills. The ability to watch, listen and retain information from the people you are sharing an activity with, is an essential skill to building sound language and communication skills. For many, this task comes naturally and is created through interaction with their primary care givers, for others, attention and listening skills must be explicitly taught through fun and engaging activities.



Typical attention and listening

When we look at the language development pyramid (above) it is clear that attention and listening is the basis of good play, social interaction and language development skills – without it language is hard to learn. From a young age babies share attention with their care givers, starting from as young as 3 months babies will begin to turn to familiar sounds and begin to watch the faces of the people who are talking (iCAN, 2007). Attention and listening is a complex skills starting with focussing for a short time on a topic of the child's own choosing, to sharing attention between an object and the communication partner e.g. look at the train I'm playing with then look at dad to show him what I'm playing with. Following on from this children then build up the skills to anticipate something in a routine through to following simple instructions.

How can we develop attention and listening in clients with complex needs?

It is no surprise, given the role attention and listening plays in typical language development, that clients with complex needs who use AAC require support to develop these skills before they can be a successful user of a communication system. In order to learn from their communication partner, the client must at first be watching what the communication partner is doing on the AAC system and then copy/retain that information to use functionally at a later time. For some clients this is not a difficult task but for many it requires support from their team to build these skills successfully.



Here are some ways to build attention and listening skills:

1. Make it fun!

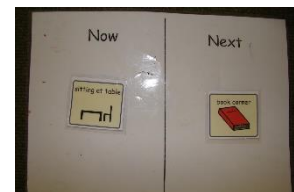
You have to be the most exciting thing for your client if you want them to look and listen to you. Fun is different for all our client groups with some enjoying sensory play like noisy toys, lights that flash or wet play. Others may enjoy stacking things up and knock it down. Get to know the client or student well and use their motivators to start building attention.

2. Practice taking turns

When we break down a conversation it is simply, a series of turns. I speak, then I wait for you to speak, then I respond, and so on. Early turn taking play can simply be making noises back and forth with your client. You can begin with copying what your student or client does during their play with turns e.g. they tap something and stop then you tap and stop. Use games where you can be flexible with the time and number of turns someone takes. This can be as simple as stacking blocks or putting marbles down a marble run.

3. Use visuals

Visual schedules, time timers, now and next boards and communication books/boards all have a place when building these skills (see our previous tip on schedules [here](#)). Not sure that Johnny is looking when you are modelling? Model anyway! There's a chance they are using peripheral vision or tuning in and out of the activity and so there's an opportunity to see visuals in use. Words like "look" and phrases like "my turn" are great places to start. Use a schedule to show that an activity will pass and then the client can move on to a different activity.



4. Motivation is the key!

Following a client's lead is essential when building early language and communication skills. Watching what your client/student/child is interested in and using those to build attention and play skills will foster good relationships and keep the client engaged. For many clients the motivators aren't always clear – remember to think outside the square. Some motivators may be as simple as a spinning top or stacking items and knocking them down. Work with occupational therapists if the client has lots of sensory needs to identify what might be motivating or engaging for your client or student.

5. Reduce those questions

It is really tempting when clients have low language to ask a lot of questions, particularly questions that only require a yes or no response. Try to increase comments and swap questions for comments e.g. instead of "do you like that?" use "I can see you like that" or "that looks fun" and supplement it with your visuals (see April 2015 Tip of the Month on modelling [here](#)).

If you support your client to build good attention and listening skills then they will be able to learn from you. Take a look at the following websites for ideas for games to build those attention and listening skills:

www.facebook.com/ginadavisautism

<http://www.intensiveinteraction.co.uk/>

<http://asdteacher.com/>

<http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk/>

<http://www.afasic.org.uk/help-for-your-child/free-downloads/>