

Speech & language
therapy

Attention and Listening

Listening is a skill that young children need to learn. There are different levels of attention and listening which children move through as they develop.

0 - 1 year **Fleeting attention**

The child is easily distracted and attention flits from one thing to another.

1 - 2 years **Rigid Attention**

The child can concentrate on a task of his own choice but he cannot tolerate interruption by an adult. He may appear wilful or obstinate.

2 - 3 years **Single Channelled Attention**

The child cannot cope with doing one thing and listening to an instruction about something else at the same time. He has to do one thing or another. If an adult wants to give an instruction, the child must be asked to stop his activity, listen to the adult and then return to his chosen task.

3 - 4 years **Focusing Attention**

The child is gradually beginning to control his own focus of attention but can still only concentrate on one thing at a time - the task or the unrelated instruction. However, he can now shift his focus of attention from one to another himself.

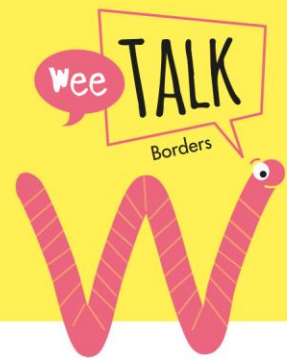
4 - 5 years **Two channelled Attention**

Attention is now two channelled, that is, he can do a task and understand an instruction at the same time. His concentration span may still be short but he can be taught in a group.

5 - 6 years **Integrated Attention**

Two channelled attention is now well established across different situations with different people.

Reference: Cooper, Moodley and Reynell (1978) 'Helping Language Development'

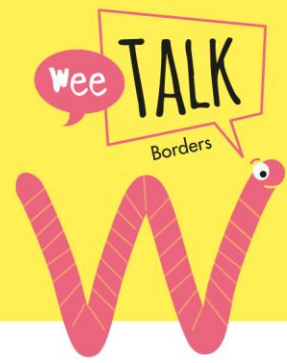


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General Strategies

- Say your child's name before you give an instruction, e.g. '**Sam**....listen...' Praise your child for turning to you or stopping what they are doing.
- Alternatively, say to your child 'look at me', gently turn their face towards you and then give the instruction. Again, praise your child for turning to you or stopping what they are doing.
- Reduce background noise and distractions where possible. For a child who is struggling with developing their listening and attention skills it is difficult for them to identify which noises are important to listen to.
- Try not to have the television, radio or music on constantly in the background. Instead, use these as 'active listening' times where you watch a programme or listen to a particular song together.
- Point out noises around the home, in the setting or outside that your child may not have heard such as doors banging, cars going past, the phone ringing etc. Tune them in to listening to environmental noises.
- Teach 'good listening skills' to your child - teach them to stop, keep still and look at the speaker. (At the two-channelled attention stage, the child can listen and attend without looking.)
- You could use made up gestures to reinforce 'stop/keep still', 'look' and 'listen'.
- Use positive language to reinforce good attention and listening behaviour such as 'that's good sitting', 'good looking' and 'good listening'.
- When working on increasing your child's attention span, keep the games or activities short to start with and build up the length of time slowly.
- If you can, show your child that there is an end in sight to an activity, e.g. give them a 10 piece puzzle but only take out 5 pieces for them to put back in or show them a set of pictures that need sticking before they begin a gluing and sticking activity.

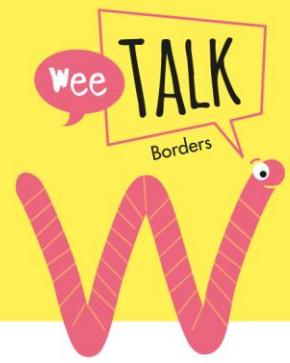
Reference: L. Elks and H. McLachlan (2009) 'Early Language Builders'



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Activities and Games to Play

- Play **musical statues** and help your child to listen for when the music stops.
- Put some **bricks** out to build a tower. Your child has to wait for you to say 'Go'. This can also be done as you are tidying any toys away into a box.
- Hide a **noisy toy** or a clock somewhere in the room for your child to find.
- Beat out a **rhythm** using a musical instrument or your hand on the table. See if your child can copy the beat by joining in with you. See if they can walk, march or skip to the beat.
- **Feely boxes or bags** - have an object of interest in the box and open the lid slowly. Let your child put their hand in the box and feel it. Then take the object out and play with it. The objects could be a glove puppet, a squeaky toy, a toy car etc.
- Sing **nursery rhymes** and favourite songs and leave a gap for your child to fill in the missing words, e.g. 'Humpty Dumpty sat on a'.
- Look at **books** that have flaps in them to try and sustain your child's interest in looking at the whole book, such as the 'Spot the Dog' series or 'The Hungry Caterpillar'.
- Build up your child's ability to listen and remember a number of items. Play '**pretend shops**' and ask for one item, e.g. 'Get me the apple' and build up to 2 or 3 items, e.g. 'Get me the apple, the juice and the tomato'. You could also ask your child to point to body parts, e.g. point to your nose', then build up to 2 or 3 body parts 'point to your eyes, your tummy and your head'.
- Play '**Simon Says**' with the rest of your family and give commands such as 'Simon says jump up and down'; 'Simon says touch your toes'. Your child has to pay attention and listen carefully for when you give a command without saying 'Simon says', e.g. 'Sit on the floor'. If they do the action, they are then out of the game. Let them have a go at giving the commands.
- Play '**run and touch**', which is best done outside. Choose 4 or 5 things you can see in the garden, e.g. tree, fence, swing etc. Say 'run to the.....', 'run to the tree' etc. When your child can do this, add another e.g. 'run to the swing and then to the fence'.



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Useful Resources

- books with 'pop up' pictures or flaps
- musical instruments
- real or pretend objects of interest to be used for feely bag activities
- lots of activities and suggestions can be found in the 'Communication Cookbook' at: www.talkinpoint.org.uk/Parent/Directory/Cookbook.aspx

For more information on the Speech and Language Therapy Service (including how to request support from us) please see: <http://www.nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk/slt>
[Check out our Wee Talk Borders Facebook page or you can call us on 01896 826710](#)