

Lift Your Child's Spirit and Performance with...
Listening Fitness

By Paul MADAULE

While searching for an opening sentence to this article, I can hear a cacophony of high pitch screams of excitement, exclamations or arguments fusing like vocal fireworks. It is recess at the school just beside my house. From the window, I see kids running after a soccer ball, gesticulating like disjointed puppets or gathering in small animated bunches. Then the bell rings, they disappear and everything suddenly goes silent.

One would be tempted to believe that listening begins now, in the quietness of the classroom. In fact, the children have been listening all along at recess (and I mean listening, not to be confused with hearing). All this playing, running around, yelling, jumping, arguing, joking and poking fun at each other were many ways of giving their listening a workout, and the quality of this workout determines the quality of their focus, attention span, engagement and active participation in the classroom. Children in the courtyard do nothing more than train their listening to have it fit and ready for use when it's time to sit still, keep quiet and study.

Listening Fitness applies to both ends of the ear's double antenna, the auditory end and the 'ear of the body' (vestibular end). This is why recess as well as physical activity (sports, gym) are vital ingredients in any well balanced educational setting. This is also why the time spent watching TV, playing computer games and any other pass times that keep the child physically passive should be kept in check. Consumed in excess, they become listening 'no-no's', the ear's equivalent of bad cholesterol. The phenomenal rise in the number of children with ADHD has a lot to do with the decrease of body exercise and social interaction which lead to a depletion of listening workout, and pills are not the solution. Getting the kids to play, to exercise and to engage in 'listening-enriched' pursuits such as singing, playing music, dancing or acting, is a giant step towards a solution.

Listening Roadblocks

Listening grows and develops naturally. However, there may be some obstacles. While allergies or ear infections may affect hearing for a few days or weeks, they tend to have lasting and sometimes permanent effect on listening. The resulting defect of the attuning function of the ear weakens auditory processing, reduces attention span, creates gaps or delays in the acquisition of language, which are some of the obstacles leading to learning disabilities. Physical or health problems that restrain movements and the use of motor skills may also be roadblocks for listening. Their causes may be as diverse as premature birth, confinement in an incubator or in bed for extended periods of time. As a result, neither the ear nor the body is sufficiently stimulated.

Stimulation in excess can also be detrimental. Exposure to loud noises takes a toll on listening well before it begins to damage hearing. Those children who cover their ears on the street, in the mall or in the subway are reminders that sound pollution exists, and it can hurt.

Parents have to be particularly vigilant with personal audio devices (CD Player, MP3 etc) where the volume level is so tricky to verify.

In many cases, it is impossible to tell why listening hasn't developed naturally. Whatever the cause of the listening deficit, there is a point where educational strategies are at a loss. When listening is impaired, trying to increase those 'listening enriched' activities such as music, singing or acting classes, may not work. This is because they require a fair degree of listening to begin with, the very skill the child is lacking. As the result, she will most likely shy away from them, find them boring or, more plainly, she will 'hate' them. As an 'ex-poor listener', I experienced first hand a visceral dislike for anything to do with acting (memorizing lines was like pulling teeth and talking in public was gut wrenching). While I loved music, playing an instrument was not an option because of my poor sense of rhythm and inability to coordinate my hands.

When Listening Needs a Little Help

The good news is that listening can be developed and strengthened through training programs such as Listening Fitness. Sufficiently flexible, non-invasive and user friendly, Listening Fitness can easily be adapted to fit a school setting where children spend most of their day. I am convinced that every child can benefit from a little 'listening booster' before starting to read and write. Knowing that about one third of the school-age population presents some sort of attention, behavior or/and learning problem, most of them related to listening, Listening Fitness could be used as a preventive measure. Trained practitioners around the world including The Listening Centre in Toronto offer Listening Fitness in their practice,

Progress Expectation from Listening Fitness

Results from a listening training program vary according to the type and degree of the child's listening-related concern, age, developmental history and other elements which may influence everyday life such as health, family dynamics or placement at school. This is a list of some of the most typical progress observations as reported by parents and teachers during and following a program.

Receptive listening: Expressions such as: "more focused", "doesn't ask others to repeat as much" imply that attention span is longer due to improved auditory processing. Comments like: "more present", "more with it", "more with us", "more observant" "he looks smarter", are associated with the child's increased awareness and reflected through better eye contact and more facial expression. Observations like "he has a better understanding of class's content" or "she is not as easily distractible during homework" are usually related with improved concentration.

Expressive listening: speech is clearer, better articulated with less hesitation and richer vocabulary. Many children start to formulate their thoughts in full sentences and the construction of the sentences is more correct. "He told us about a movie he saw and the story was not all mixed up, it made sense!".

Written language: reading improves within a few weeks into the program and it shows as a new interest to decode; “she spontaneously spells out the words on highway signs now; it is as if she is seeing something in the letters that she didn’t see before”, “we catch him with a book in his hands. That’s a first!” Consistent changes in writing and spelling take about 2 or 3 months.

Motor skills and co-ordination: the way some kids go down the stairs is a sign of how much better balanced, more stable and freer in their movements they become during the program. School work gets neater, with more shape and definition in their drawings and better control of handwriting: “his lines are not all over the page, they are straight”.

Organization: one of the most usual ‘firsts’ is cleaning up the room as if “he suddenly sees the mess”, “he knows what to bring from school to do his homework and he gets it ready in time”. Sequencing improves as well: “She is able to put her priorities in order”.

Engagement: “Can I help?” She is keener to do her part of the home chores and the teacher comments that she raises her hand more often. Words like ‘motivation’, ‘stamina’, ‘level of interest’, are commonly used by the parents right from the early stages of the program.

Social adjustment: “Not only does he make friends, but he keeps them”; “the phone has been ringing more lately”; “now she tolerates her little brother; he is not getting at her as easily”; “he is sharing his toys”.

Self-regulation: from mood to homework, things are flowing better. Irritability decreases and the child becomes more flexible: “she can talk about her frustration rather than blowing it out”; “there is room for negotiation”. Distractibility recedes “Her homework is all done in one sitting”. There is a new sense of ease: “She is as perky as ever, but more peaceful inside, not nearly as hyper”.

Level of energy: “sleeps better”; “sleeping time has decreased but it is deeper, and he is well awake and ready to get going in the morning, no more crankiness”; “there is enough steam left after school to do the homework”.

Expression of affect: feelings are better articulated: “I love you Mom”; “I don’t like to see you sad”; “he is more affectionate with his siblings”; “she always cared about us, now she says it”. “Happier”, “more confident”, “more upbeat”, “less anxious” are frequently reported, indicating that self image and self confidence are building up.

Achievement at school: the first comments from school are about readiness: “more effort”, “applies better” “listens better”. It takes about one term for higher grades to materialize and one full school year to see the full results of a program.

Most of the changes occur spontaneously. While parents are ecstatic about them, the child reacts as if they are part of a natural evolution. When we point them out, her typical reaction is: “big deal!” or “what’s all the fuss about?” – and she may have a point. After all these years monitoring kids’ responses to their listening training, I strongly believe that the so

called 'changes' are in fact budding skills that just need a little help to blossom. Listening Fitness offers this little help. The child has become who he really is.

Paul Madaule, 2009