

# The POWER of Listening

“Listening” means Different Things to different People.  
Herewith, a review of what listening is  
and how it affects behavior in children.

By Paul Madaule

**T**he child's well being, social adjustment and academic achievement are greatly determined by the quality of her or his listening. Listening plays a fundamental role in the development of communication, language and learning.

Listening is often understood as the effect of concentrated effort, as in “pay attention and listen!” In reality, it is the other way around: good attention span is the result of proper listening and listening is effortless. If listening necessitates effort, it indicates that it is not good enough to be sustained for long, leading to short attention span. As soon as I hear about a child with ADD, my first thought is: What about her listening? My experience is that improved listening can often replace Ritalin or any other psycho-stimulant medication – and the effect is permanent.

Automatic and effortless, listening is at the root of our focus and attention span as it is and essential component in the child's spontaneous engagement and motivation. Listening involves sound perception as well as the “ear of the body”, which plays a key role in the body posture, movements,

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**ABOARD THE BICYCLE:** The ear is responsible for sound perception and for the sense of balance.





spatial awareness, motor skills and non-verbal communication. Listening provides the control mechanism of speech and singing. In addition, to picking up the sound information we choose, listening acts as the eyelids of the ears by protecting us from unwelcome and unnecessary "noise."

These are some of the reasons why listening has the power to turn a child's life around one way or another.

For over 35 years, I have worked on improving the quality of life and achievement level for thousands of individuals, mostly children, using a listening training technique. In all those years of practice, I observed time and time again children performing better at school, becoming happier, more open, calmer, more focused, more motivated, more flexible, more accommodating, getting along better with their peers - and the list could go on. These results keep reinforcing my firm conviction on the fantastic power of listening.

Our work on listening dovetails with Maria Montessori's vision on education and the child. It is no coincidence that a Montessori School first introduced listening training in Toronto. Montessori educators are best prepared to understand and make use of the power of listening.

But my conviction comes from a deeper, more personal place. My childhood and adolescence consisted of a long series of setbacks at school. Dyslexia affected my reading, writing, math - and I couldn't even express myself properly. Years of remedial help and therapies only made me feel more inadequate. When I reached puberty, life became hell on earth with no way out.

It all changed when, at 18, I met Dr Alfred Tomatis, who helped me with a listening training method using electronically modified sounds that he had invented. I was then able to resume high school, went to university and my life started to turn around. This is when I decided to become a psychologist and to specialize in listening.

### Listening Misconceptions

The word 'listening' means different things to different people. As a result, it is prone to all sorts of pre-conceived and erroneous ideas. A review of four key misconceptions will help to more clearly define what listening is and what it does.

#### 1. Hearing and Listening Are Not

# ABOUT LISTENING TRAINING

The Listening training offered at the Listening Centre is a program of sound stimulation and counseling which is based on the work of Dr. Alfred Tomatis, a French ear, nose and throat specialist who maintained that human activities such as receptive and expressive communication, learning, social behavior, activity level, motor function and co-ordination are related to the listening function.

The Listening Centre is mostly known for its work with children and adults with Learning Disabilities (dyslexia) and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). It also provides services to children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders and other neurologically or genetically based developmental delays, such as Cerebral Palsy or Down's Syndrome. Programs are also available for facilitating the acquisition of foreign

languages or for more proficient use of the voice for teachers, singers or performing artists.

An intake at The Listening Centre starts with an Initial Assessment, which determines whether or not a person is a candidate for the listening training program. Most programs consist of two intensive phases of about 30 hours each with a four- to six-week break in between.

Each child (or adult) receives an individually tailored program of sound through headphones. The child can play, draw, paint or even sleep; she doesn't need to concentrate on what she hears. During the second or "active phase" the emphasis is on expressive listening, the auditory control of the voice. Here she is asked to hum, sing, speak or read into a microphone while her voice is fed into her ears once it has been electronically modified. The Listening Consultant monitors the program and provides guidance to the child's parents.

- P.M.



Paul Madaule is director of the Listening Centre in Toronto.

**Similar.** We are constantly bombarded with myriads of sounds coming from both the environment and our own body. This constant exposure is hearing. Our hearing is not 'on' all the time, or it would drive us crazy! But, we are equipped with a mechanism which permits us to 'scoop up' the sounds of messages we want and leave out those we don't want. While hearing is passive, non discriminative and involuntary, listening is active and it involves the intent to reach out. This implies that hearing too much is an indicator of poor listening. Children who are over stimulated or easily overloaded and those who cover their ears with their hands because of their hypersensitivity to sounds, are poor listeners. Another weak listener is the distractible child who is unable to bring the voice of the teacher to the foreground while leaving the other noises of

the classroom far in the background.

**2. Listening Does Not Only Apply to Sound.** The ear is responsible for sound perception *and* for the sense of balance. The vestibular system of the inner ear makes us aware of our body in space, of the space around us, of our relative movements and of our posture. It influences motor skills and coordination when moving the eyes for tracking in reading and when moving the arms and fingers in writing. Skills as diverse as playing ball games, skating, dancing or playing a musical instrument all depend of this 'ear of the body'. It also influences the way our body 'speaks', that is the non-verbal aspect of communication, which is an essential component of social interaction. Spatial awareness, which is so important in the understanding of math concepts, can also be linked to the the ear of the





Above: Listening is at the root of our focus and attention span as it is an essential component in the child's spontaneous engagement and motivation.

Left: The interplay between the auditory and vestibular ear acts as a conductor for all the senses.

body. The interplay between the auditory and vestibular ear acts as a conductor for all the senses.

**3. Listening Is Not Only a Receptive Skill.** Judging by their giggles and laughter, toddlers seem to have great fun gargling, babbling and making all sorts of noises. They play with their voice as if it were a ball – throwing it into the air and watching how and where it falls. This game is their attempt to replicate the sounds they hear around them. Then, when they produce something sounding more or less like ‘ma’ or ‘da’, their Mom or Dad responds with a big smile and cheers; the sound ‘juice’ brings this sweet liquid that tastes so good. While playing this voice game, they discover the fun – and the power – of verbal communication.

They can play this game which gives them so much control because they are able to perceive their voice making sounds they have heard before. We know that without hearing, speech does not develop naturally. But hearing is not sufficient. The acquisition of speech and language requires a fine-tuning of the auditory system to pick up the very specific sounds of the mother's tongue. The ‘sound play’ is the child's way of fine tuning her ear, body and nervous system, and turning them into active players in the process of communication. In other words, the child is training her listening. We are the first listeners of what we say and the clarity and intelligibility of

our speech depends on the quality of our ‘expressive listening’. The same is true for our singing voice: singing out of tune is listening to ourselves out of tune.

**4. Listening Does Not Necessarily Mean Obeying.** The word listening is often associated with ‘obeying’ such as in “listen to me!” and, as a consequence, poor listening may be viewed as a behavioral issue such as a lack of discipline. As far as I am concerned, the one who is able to choose what to listen and what not to listen to is a good listener. The wisdom of his choice is another matter. Poor listening is the inability to make this choice, meaning that a listening problem should not be confused with a behavioral problem.

#### Case Study: David

David was 12 years old when he started a listening training because of his underachievement at school. I remember explaining to his father that David is listening problem was not to be confused with a disciplinary one when he interrupted me to say: “When we talk about hockey, he is all listening, but when I help him with his homework, there is nobody there, and his school reports are filled with comments like “doesn’t listen” or “doesn’t pay attention”; for me, it is clear, he only listens to what he likes”.

I explained that in hockey, David knows the names of the players, the jargon of the game and he can easily visualize what they are talking about – and yes, his love of

hockey helps. With school work, things are not as straight forward; the concepts are abstract, the vocabulary is new, and, true, it is not as exciting as hockey. David had not willingly “cut off” school as his dad implied, but school was a much greater challenge for his listening.

A few weeks into his listening training, his father reported that, to his great surprise, “There is no pulling teeth around homework anymore! Most days, he starts and goes through it with no need for a reminder and minimum support.” Comments like “applies better” or “participates more” started showing on the next report card.

One can argue that improved listening made David more obedient and more disciplined, but this obedience and discipline came from within; it was his choice. By being more focused and more structured, David could now be engaged in schoolwork (almost) the way he was in hockey. Listening fosters engagement and motivation. **M**

PAUL MADAULE, a French-trained psychologist, is the Director of the Listening Centre in Toronto. He is the author of “When Listening Comes Alive” and of numerous articles on the application of listening training. (See [www.listeningcentre.com](http://www.listeningcentre.com)) Paul also developed Listening Fitness, an education-oriented skill enhancement method (See [www.listeningfitness.com](http://www.listeningfitness.com)).