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Is There a Difference Between Hearing and Listening?

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Even though we use the words *hearing* and *listening* interchangeably, the difference in meaning is significant. Hearing is a sense. Listening is a learned skill. *Hearing is the process, function, or power of perceiving sound. Listening is paying attention to a message in order to hear it, understand it, and physically or verbally respond to it.*

Several things must happen in order for us to listen effectively:

- Sound waves carry spoken words to our ears.
- Sound travels through the outer ear canals (without obstruction) and then through the eardrum and middle ear without being distorted by fluid from colds, infection, or allergies.
- Sound then travels from the middle ear through the inner ear (which must be functioning properly as well) along the auditory nerve to the brain.
- Finally, the brain compares what it hears to previously stored sounds and words in order to make sense of the message and respond accordingly.

Listening is a very critical part of communication, as much as speaking clearly and choosing the right words. One person sends a message and another receives it. Talking to someone who is not paying attention or listening is frustrating,



as we may have to repeat things over and over without getting an adequate response. The person (receiver) with poor listening skills may misunderstand the message, therefore creating frustration. A child with a listening disorder can test your patience, but you have to remember, the child is equally frustrated. Parents may interpret behaviors resulting from their child's frustration in communicating as ignoring you, not paying close attention, just being silly, or acting foolishly.

A child having problems with listening skills is more likely to have difficulties coping in classroom situations because the majority of information teachers deliver to students is auditory. Imagine your child's frustration when he/she walks into the classroom and hears, "*Students, please hang your jackets in your cubby and unpack your backpack. But before you hang and unpack your backpack, please come give me your lunch*"





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order. If you brought money for your field trip next week, please put it in the red basket on my desk. Make sure to sharpen your pencils before you sit down to do your seatwork. When you finish your seatwork, put it in your blue reading folder, get out your reading book, and wait for me.”

If your child’s brain can’t stay focused on the listening task long enough to translate the information, the message is lost. This happens when a child has an *auditory memory* problem. If the child has an *attention deficit* problem too, the problems may be compounded. With attention deficit problems, the brain is trying to work on too many tasks at once and can’t stay with a message long enough to process or comprehend it. Then, if the brain is having difficulty storing old information, it will not know how to make sense of the current message; therefore, *auditory comprehension* or *auditory processing* problems may result.



Children need strong listening skills to receive and develop language. Many children with language problems have difficulty with receptive language (understanding messages received) and expressive language (the output of language; responding verbally and meaningfully to messages). When a child’s receptive language isn’t developing appropriately, the entire language learning process can stall before it begins. Sometimes



parents seem more concerned if their child isn’t talking the way they expect (especially in comparison to their peers), but speech-language pathologists want to find out first if the child is hearing clearly and understanding language. If not, meaningful speech, or expressive language, is not going to develop. This is why speech therapists often focus more on strengthening a child’s receptive language skills (listening), even if the concern is that the child isn’t talking properly.

If you notice your child is having difficulties communicating or isn’t able to listen and respond appropriately, consult your family doctor or pediatrician. Doctors can recommend the next steps in having your child screened and evaluated extensively by a speech-language pathologist in your area. After an appropriate diagnosis, and with the right help, a child can improve his/her listening skills and language overall.

Resources:

Beck, Douglas L. and Flexer, Carol. Hearing Science: Listening Is Where Hearing Meets Brain...in Children and Adults <http://www.audioenhancement.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Listening-Is-Where-Hearing-Meets-Brain-in-Children-and-Adults.pdf>

Hamaguchi, Patricia M., *Childhood Speech, Language & Listening Problems: What Every Parent Should Know*. Second Edition. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. © 2001., pp. 10-11.

HubPages. 2016. The Difference Between Hearing and Listening. Retrieved January 2016 from <http://hubpages.com/business/Hearing-vs-Listening-The-difference>.

Mancuso, Dean. Understood: for listening and attention issues. Retrieved January 2016 from <https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/auditory-processing-disorder/difference-betweenauditory-processing-and-listening-comprehension>

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