

Active Listening

*"I know that you believe you understand what you think I said,
but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard - is not what I meant."*

Robert McCloskey

This quote is about communication, but more so, it's about hearing and listening. *Active*, or *empathetic listening* is a distinct and important tool to facilitate accurate and meaningful communication. During their November 2008 meeting, Philadelphia Early Intervention Supervisors indicated that they want and need to refine their active listening skills to enhance their supervision practices.

When a variety of resources and guides about how to develop active listening are consulted, common themes emerge related to the listener actively *intending to understand*, directing full attention to the speaker, and recognizing both verbal and non-verbal expressions. Here are several strategies that are particularly useful for early intervention supervisors:

- A distraction-free environment supports optimal listening. That means you meet away from your computer, cell phone and PDA. Be determined that you will stop multi-tasking during the interaction/exchange (don't even allow the behind-the-scenes task-juggling that goes on in your head!).
- Active listening *requires* responses from you— ask for more information, request clarification, paraphrase and summarize what you've heard.
- Remember that *active listening takes practice*, so you won't be a pro at first. Initially, the person you're speaking with won't expect anything other than your usual types of exchange.

- If you need to end the conversation before the speaker is finished, be sure to express your interest in continuing or learning more - and suggest a future opportunity, but acknowledge that for now, you need to end the meeting and get to another appointment or complete the project that's due tomorrow.

In Philadelphia, January is the month to practice and refine your active listening skills. Do this with those you supervise, those who share space in your office, your program administrators, parents and caregivers with whom you work, friends and others.

Some suggestions for effective listening are included on the next page. If you need to learn more, there are numerous Internet resources that provide information, self-study materials and practice exercises. Here are some recommendations to get you started:

- ◇ From Blue Cross/Blue Shield:
<http://www.ahealthyme.com/topic/listening>
- ◇ From MindTools—16 page ebooklet:
<http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/Mind%20Tools%20Listening.pdf>

We need your feedback! Make a note of your experiences and what works for you, as well as any specific resources that are helpful. Be sure to bring this information with you to the Supervisors' Meeting on February 11th so that others may benefit!

Mary Muhlenhaupt



Idea of the Month

Teaching and Learning Collaborative
Child & Family Studies Research Programs
130 South 9th St, Suite 500
Philadelphia, PA 19107
<http://jeffline.jefferson.edu/tlc>
215.503.4019

Bite Your Tongue! 10 Ways to Be a Better Communicator and an Effective Listener *By Joy Fisher-Sykes*

Have you ever spoken to someone and then felt the need to say, "Did you hear what I just said?" Why did you feel the need to ask? Probably because the listener didn't provide you with the feedback you needed to know you were heard. Listening is the most important, yet often most neglected, communication skill. In fact, the ability to listen is often rated one of the top five abilities employers seek in their staff. It's also certainly highly sought after in the people nearest and dearest to our hearts. Here are 10 ways to be an effective listener:

1. **Recognize the difference between hearing and listening.** There is a very distinct difference between hearing and listening. Hearing is to merely perceive sound. Listening is the mindful, conscious act and desire to hear, comprehend, and respond to others.
2. **Be willing to listen.** Begin with a commitment to listen - be open minded and consider other points of view. Listen regardless of whether you agree or disagree with what's said. Resist the urge to jump to conclusions, be defensive or be argumentative with the speaker.
3. **Be attentive.** Stop what you're doing and give the speaker your undivided attention. If it's not a good time for you, defer the conversation. Ignore the desire to multi-task and selectively listen (only listening to bits and pieces of information). Remain in the moment for the duration of the conversation - don't tune in and out or pretend to be listening when you're really thinking about where to go on your next vacation.
4. **Show respect.** Acknowledge others with your body language - face the speaker, look interested, and make eye contact. Avoid ending the conversation abruptly.
5. **Empathize.** Be sensitive, compassionate, and understanding - realize it may be difficult for the speaker to talk about this matter. Empathy doesn't mean you have to agree with the speaker. Avoid thinking about how to "one up" the speaker with your own tale of woe.
6. **Be patient.** We often interrupt because we are afraid we will forget our point(s). Don't interrupt - allow the speaker to finish what she/he has to say. Don't finish the speaker's sentences because you think they're taking too long to get to the point. Focus on what is being said instead of what you think is going to be said.
7. **Eliminate interruptions and distractions.** When possible, speak in a neutral location to avoid interruptions and distractions. Be aware of and avoid interruptions - phones or pagers (use voice mail), visitors (close the door) and distractions (voice mail light, overflowing in box, incoming mail).
8. **Seek Understanding.** Focus on main points. Paraphrase and seek clarification of points that are unclear or that you don't understand.
9. **Show you're actively listening.** Listen with more than just your ears. Acknowledge and respond to the speaker with facial expressions (smile, nod/shake your head, eye contact) and verbal comments ("I see," "I understand," "okay," "yes") to aid the conversation.
10. **Simply Listen** Sometimes our idea of listening is to jump in and give unwanted advice. Listening is not an open invitation to resolve a dilemma. Just listen because often the speaker simply seeks a sympathetic ear.

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