

*The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand and be understood. The best way to understand people is to listen to them.*

—Ralph G. Nichols



## EMPOWERING EDUCATION

Mindfulness-Based Social & Emotional Learning

### Active Listening

**Level:** Upper Elementary (3-5)

**Timeframe:** 20-30 minutes

**Concepts:**

- Active Listening
- Communication Skills
- Conflict Resolution



### Big Ideas For This Lesson

As adults, we know from experience that no person is capable of listening to every instruction 100% of the time. Our students need to hear that we do not expect them to always listen. Attention, and the willpower to direct our attention, is a finite resource. Constant listening and attention is an impossible task. Operating from this mindset, we can negate the commonly held belief that students “choose not to listen,” and instead focus on proactive strategies for engaging students and encouraging active listening.

So what is a fair expectation around listening? Today we will define listening, discuss listening limitations, set expectations as a class around listening, and learn specific skills that support listening.

Listening is a teachable skill. Research shows that people who have been [taught to listen are better at it](#).<sup>1</sup> Being taught to listen occurs formally and informally. Students have also learned lessons that hinder listening. For example, a parent might ask their child, “How was your day today?” while scrolling through their phone. Modeling like this teaches the child that it is acceptable to pretend to listen while preoccupied with another task. Getting better at appearing to listen is the implicit message. As teachers, how often do we model pretend-listening?

To invite compassion and patience, take a moment to reflect on how a child’s home life influences their listening skills. How has s/he seen listening modeled? Setting this lesson aside, the best way to teach is to model by actively listening and attending to the needs of our students.



## Essential Vocabulary

Active Listening  
Body Language  
Clarifying Questions  
Clarifying Statements  
Hearing vs. Receiving  
Minimal Encouragers  
Paraphrase  
Reflection  
Summarizing



## Preparation

- Copy and cut out Active Listening Skills Cards, one card per student. There will be repeats.
- Have students prepare their detailed short stories ahead of time (Step 7a) as a bell warmer activity.

## Materials

- [Active Listening Skills Cards](#)
- Journal and writing utensils
- [Appendix of Active Listening Skills](#)



## Teaching Script

### BUILDING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE & CONCEPT MODELING (I DO)

**Teaching Note:** Think of your own examples of listening and non-listening. By letting students in on your own successes and shortcomings with friends and family, you will build relationships and trust. Since no one can be a perfect listener, it helps to admit your own shortcomings.

Begin by reading a short, detail heavy story aloud to the class. Do not prompt them to focus or remember details, simply state,

*Listen to the following story.*

You may choose to create your own story or use the following story.

*My neighbor, Dorothy Gale, took her dog Toto, a Cairn Terrier, for a 2 kilometer walk eight days ago. Toto was frightened by Glinda's Siamese Cat, so Dorothy disguised the cat, Ms. Felina, as a dog. Now Toto and Ms. Felina are best friends. She and Glinda take them on walks together every single Saturday at seven.*

Now ask students to recall details. See how many they can identify.

*If you can remember any detail from the story, raise your hand and keep it raised. If you hear another student share the detail you were thinking of, and if you can't remember any other details, you may put your hand down.*

Take one detail from each hand raised until all details are exhausted and all hands are lowered. Review how the class did on recall/listening. Typically, even with the whole class trying to remember details, they will usually recall less than half of the details written.

**Teaching Note:** For reference, it is helpful to project the written version of the story on the board at this point.

*So even with all of us listening, how many details did we actually remember? If we missed that many details from a four-sentence story, how many details are we missing when we think we are listening to our friends, family, and teachers every day?"*

*Just like mindfulness and learning to pay attention, listening is actually a skill that can be learned and taught. We are all expected to listen; yet few of us are taught how to listen. Today we will talk about listening as a skill and we will learn how to become better listeners. First we need to understand what listening is and how it works.*

Listening is often narrowly thought of as "sounds or words we hear." Take time to lead a question-based discussion with your class that expands this definition to **"hearing AND receiving"** the speaker's message –spoken or unspoken.

*Listening goes beyond what we notice with our sense of hearing. Today, we will define listening as 'receiving a message.' Receiving messages requires us to pay attention.*

- a. *What is the difference between hearing and receiving?*
- b. *What does it mean to listen?*
- c. *What makes listening active?*
- d. *What are some things that make you feel heard and listened to?*

(Optional connection to brain science) [There is a myth that the brain can multitask.](#)<sup>2</sup> The brain is complex and with practice we can move between tasks quickly enough to make multitasking seem possible. However, in truth we can only give our attention to one task at a time. Teach this concept to students and make the connection to listening.

*If listening is choosing to direct our attention towards a delivered message, can we listen and do some other task at the same time?*

The answer is no. Listening is a decision to give your full attention to one message and the person delivering the message.



## GUIDED PRACTICE (WE DO)

*Active Listening is the choice to engage fully with the speaker and their message. There are skills that help us listen actively. Today you will have a chance to participate in a quick activity that gives you an opportunity to practice active listening skills. Then, as a class, we will share with each other what we have learned. If we have time, we will create agreed-upon expectations for listening to one another.*

Students will now practice active listening skills by writing their own stories, reading aloud to a partner, and practicing the skills from the active listening cards. Facilitate this guided practice as follows:

- a. Prompt students to write their own short, detail packed story in their journal or on scrap paper. You may have already completed this as a bell warmer activity or earlier in the week to save time. Stories should be one paragraph in length with as many details as possible (similar to the story you read out loud in Step 1). Encourage students to write about something they are interested in.
- b. While students are writing, hand out the Active Listening Skills Cards (at least one per student, though you may pass out more than one to each student).
- c. Instruct students to review their Active Listening Card and then to pair-share their stories with a partner.
- d. While one partner shares, the other partner will be practicing the active listening skill(s) from the card.
- e. When finished, switch roles.

**Teaching Note:** You may opt to use a timer for the above activities to keep the class on track.



## REINFORCING LESSON CONCEPTS (YOU DO)

When all students have finished sharing their stories and practicing their active listening skills, review active listening skills as a class.

- a. For each skill (e.g. Reflection, Paraphrase, Body Language, etc.) ask any student who received that skill card to stand and share the definition of their skill and an example of how they used it.
- b. As students share, prompt students who are not sharing to record active listening skills in their journal for future reference.
- c. (Optional) Create a class list of active listening skills as students are sharing or have a student volunteer to record active listening skills.
- d. Allow time for questions regarding the Active Listening Skills, as this may be the first time your students have seen these.



## EVIDENCE OF CONCEPT ATTAINMENT

### *Reflect on it*

- *How do you feel when someone pretends to listen to you?*
- *What is the most difficult active listening skill for you? What skill are you best at?*
- *How often do you listen closely to the speaker?*
- *When is it most challenging to listen to a story from a friend, directions from a teacher, or questions from a parent?*

### *Journal it*

- What are three active listening skills you could work on to become a better listener?
- Set a listening goal. It can be anything that would support you in becoming a better listener.



## EXTENSIONS

### *Classroom*

- Have students create an active listening resource area with skill cards and reminder poster.
- During instruction, acknowledge active listening skills in action. Be specific.
- Reward students that are working towards improving their active listening skills.
- Create a rubric for students to track their listening skills. Students can grade themselves and set goals towards improving listening.
- Practice your own active listening skills! Refer to the “Implementation Section” of the curriculum introduction for more information

### *School-wide*

- In staff meetings bring attention to the importance of listening to students. This sounds obvious, however we all forget to slow down and attend to the needs students are expressing.
- Encourage active listening in meetings. Work to improve communication in team meetings by taking notes or assigning a note taker.
- Create templates for meetings that identify main points of meeting, note taker(s), etc.
- Listening especially applies to the teacher-parent relationship. Before delivering information to the parent, try to listen to their concerns first. Also identify and address any implicit messages from parents.



## REFERENCES

---

1. Active Listening. (1998). Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, USA. Retrieved October 24, 2015 from <http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/treatment/activel.htm>
2. Gorlick, A. (2009, August 24). Media Multitaskers Pay Mental Price, Stanford Study Shows. Retrieved October 24, 2015, from <https://news.stanford.edu/news/2009/august24/multitask-research-study-082409.html>.

## APPENDIX OF ACTIVE LISTENING SKILLS

Modeling active listening is key to effective delivery of SEL. Much of the learning in SEL comes from student share-outs and discussion. It truly takes an effective facilitator to create safe space for students to share. The following active listening skills will be your bread and butter for quality SEL delivery:

- **Paraphrasing:** Paraphrasing is the skill of repeating back to a student what they said using slightly different wording. In other words, paraphrasing involves clarifying responses by repeating the meaning, or gist, of what was shared with slightly different phrasing. See what I did there? That was a paraphrase. Use this skill often to bring clarity to student share-outs.
- **Reflection:** A reflection differs from paraphrasing in that you simply repeat back to a student what they shared without changing the wording. So, a reflection is just repeating what someone shared without changing the wording. See, I did it again. For example, if a student shares, “I feel excited,” a reflection would be, “I hear that you feel excited.”
- **Summarizing:** Kids like to talk. Sometimes a lot. Having the ability to quickly and concisely summarize longer share-outs, emphasizing important points and emotional content, will go a long way in keeping discussions moving and helping students feel heard.
- **Minimal Encouragers:** Just like it sounds – encourage sharing through small, affirmative signals in your verbal and non-verbal communication. This includes short phrases like: “Uh-huh,” “Hmmm,” “Wow,” “Keep sharing,” etc. This also includes non-verbal signals like head nodding, eye contact, facial expressions, and even the “keep going” hand signal. You may be surprised at the depth of responses you can elicit with simple minimal encouragers.
- **Body Language:** Your body language is critical to helping students feel safe to share. The classic “open” posture when seated is leaning slightly forward with your hands on your lap and your body at a slight angle to the speaker. The same principles apply when standing: consider your proximity to the student (move closer, but not too close), your posture (avoid crossing your arms), and your overall presentation (facial expressions, alertness, interest). Play around with different body language postures and see what responses you get from students.
- **Clarifying Questions:** Never underestimate the power of a good open-ended question. Questions like, “What do you mean when you say \_\_\_\_\_?”; “How did you feel?”; “What were you thinking at the time?”; “Can you explain that more?” can be useful and inviting ways to demonstrate listening and prompt further sharing.
- **Clarifying Statements:** Direct, clarifying statements are often underutilized because they feel too “bossy” or demanding, but they can often be more effective than questions. Simple, open-ended statements like: “Say more about that,” “Explain how you felt,” “Keep going,” or “Talk about \_\_\_\_\_” can be delivered in a warm way that accesses more honest sharing from students due to the implicit command tone.



<p><b>Mindfulness</b></p> <p>Focus all of your attention on the speaker and set aside your own thoughts. Only listen.</p>	<p><b>Clarifying Questions</b></p> <p>Try to remember details and after the story ask questions about those details.</p>	<p><b>Reflection</b></p> <p>Choose one specific detail to repeat back to the speaker to show you were listening. (<i>"I heard that..."</i>)</p>
<p><b>Reflection</b></p> <p>Notice any emotion in a story and check-in with the speaker. 'Sounds like you felt happy.'</p>	<p><b>Clarifying Questions</b></p> <p>Politely ask questions as the speaker tells the story to help you understand.</p>	<p><b>Summarizing</b></p> <p>When the speaker is finished with their story, tell them a short summary of what you heard.</p>
<p><b>Minimal Encouragers</b></p> <p>Use small head nods and short words to show you're listening. 'Yes, I understand.'</p>	<p><b>Paraphrasing</b></p> <p>Repeat back a short version of their story to help you listen and show you are paying attention.</p>	<p><b>Paraphrasing</b></p> <p>Repeat back small parts of the story using different words to show you understand the message.</p>
<p><b>Body Language</b></p> <p>Look at the speaker while they tell you their story.</p>	<p><b>Body Language</b></p> <p>Smile and notice how you are standing or sitting. Are you showing that you're listening?</p>	<p><b>Clarifying Statements</b></p> <p>When the speaker is finished, encourage them to share more using a simple statement like, "Say more about that."</p>