Attention and Listening Developmental Milestones

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| Age  |  | Attention level  |  | Effect on language  |  | Strategies to develop and support attention and listening  |
| Up to 1 year  | • •  | Very distractible. Attention is fleeting and given to the most exciting stimulus in the room.   | •  | Can find it difficult to attend to what you are saying.  | •  | Find out what motivates your child and incorporate these into activities.  |
| Between 1 and 2 years  | • •  | Can attend to an activity of their own choosing for a longer period of time but need to block out all other distractions. Attention is described as rigid and inflexible.  | •  | Your child may block out what you are saying to concentrate on what they are doing.  | • • •  | Allow them to finish what they are doing before gaining their attention. Gain your child’s attention first by using their name and/or touching them. Sing songs with your child and leave out words for them to fill in.   |
| Between 2 and 3 years  | • •  | Attention is still single channelled but beginning to be able to attend to adults. Beginning to switch attention between adults and task.  | • •  | Able to listen to adult instructions if the child stops what they are doing. Adults need to ensure they have the child’s attention before giving any instructions.  | • • •  | Make sure child is looking towards you when you are speaking to them. Be specific; using the child’s name to help focus their attention. Play games so your child develops their ability to listen to and follow simple instructions, e.g. ‘Simon Says’, musical statutes, ready, steady, go…   |
| Between 3 and 4 years  | • •  | Attention remains single channelled but child is more able to control their attention. Child is able to switch between task and adult spontaneously.  | • •  | Will look at an adult when they speak. Able to shift their attention from the task to the adult giving instructions.  | • • •  | Tell your child when it’s time to listen. Teach listening rules in nursery/school; sit still, look at the person speaking, think about the words and wait for your turn to speak. Use gestures, pictures and objects to hold the child’s attention. These also  |

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|  |  |  |  |  |  | help them understand spoken information.  |
|  |  |  |  |  | •  | Break down long or complex instructions into shorter ‘chunks’ of information and repeat if necessary. Give the child time to process the instruction.  |
|  |  |  |  |  | •  | Gradually increase the amount of time children are expected to listen for.   |
| Between 4 and 5 years  | • •  | Able to integrate attention to multiple channels for short periods of time. Can attend to verbal instructions without needing to look at the adult giving the instruction.  | •  | Can listen whilst also completing another activity such as playing or working.  | • • •  | Praise good listening skills. E.g. good listening (to X),Teach listening rules in nursery/school; sit still, look at the person speaking, think about the words and wait for your turn to speak. Use visuals to reinforce listening rules; posters in classrooms, symbols that can be given to children to remind them of rules.   |
| 5+ years  | •  | Sustained and integrated attention is well established and under the child’s control.  | •  | Able to listen and attend well in class.  | • •  | Allow processing time. Simplify instructions into logical sequences and repeat keywords if necessary.  |
|  |  |  |  |  | •  | Encourage child to say if that haven’t understood and ask for clarification or repetition.   |