Submission for Encyclopedia of Child Behavior and Development

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Active Listening

Synonyms

To hear with thoughtful attention, consider seriously. Reflection; Empathy; Attentive Behavior; Technique of mirroring

Definition

Active listening entails the listener's involvement in hearing for intellectual and emotional messages. The listening focus is with what the person is saying, while confirming the accuracy of the content and affect of the message (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary).

Description

Active listening involves the intent to listen for meaning, in which the listener checks-in with the speaker to verify a correct understanding of the presented message. The listener's attention is to the process: what is heard and what is implied.

Active listening involves identifying explicit and implicit patterns of communication. Verbal communications are received and reflected along with the underlying expression of feelings in an attempt to understand or explain a core message. Active listening is a learned skill and effort to avoid misunderstandings by paying close attention to a speaker. Active listening can be facilitated by creating an environment conducive to listening, eliminating distractions and remaining aware that there are internal, and physical limitations such as fatigue that may interfere with the listening exchange.
Active Listening Techniques

Active listening can be used to express empathy by using questions and the following techniques: encouragement, restatements, reflections, and summaries.

- The encouraging prompts may include nodding or saying "I see" or "tell me more".
- Restating responses may offer feedback in line with "it sounds like you didn't do very well on your test" or "you forgot your homework" which can be used to mirror facts that have been shared.
- Reflecting responses such as "you seem to feel that you are", or "what I hear you saying is that you are afraid of school," can be used to capture the essence of the feelings expressed.
- Summary responses pull important ideas and facts together and can be used to establish the basis for further discussion or help with review of prior gains.

Relevance to Childhood Development

Active listening is a skill for recognizing and exploring a child’s pattern of communication. Without active communication skills, a child’s concerns often go unrecognized. By the age of five, children are aware of their power in listening and being heard. They may be able to demonstrate their ability to speak and hear yet still have difficulty listening. This can be observed in the following example: complying with detailed directions. Differences in children’s ability to listen are developmental and may include: attention disorders, emotional disturbances, prenatal drug exposure, and language proficiency. Listening can also be influenced by physiological auditory acuity (ability to hear), and auditory perception (ability to discriminate among sounds) (Lea, 2006).

In the classroom, active listening is the process of summarizing and relaying feedback to the student about expressed feelings and identified concerns (Jalong, 1995). In group, inviting the children to restate what they have heard another child say functions as practice in active listening. Other active listening activities may be introduced with pausing in the middle of a story and inviting the children to tell what they think has occurred; giving directions and having the children repeat what they have heard. Equally important is value of giving feedback to encourage the children’s active listening skill development (Church, 2001).

Relevance to Parent-Teacher Relationships

Early childhood programs that promote communication between parents and teachers can help to build a strong working relationship to support home – program collaboration.
These communications help early childhood professionals to better understand the parent’s perception and expectations of their child in relationship to the school program.

The goal in active listening is to develop an understanding of the parent’s concern and to clearly communicate the listener's interest in the parent’s message. Through the use of active listening skills, educational professionals can gain important information with which to work with.

In sum, active listening has been described as a process, which includes making empathetic comments, asking appropriate questions, paraphrasing and summarizing for the purposes of verification.

References

- Church, E. B. (2001). Listen to this! Scholastic Early Childhood Today, 16(2), 33.


- Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary. 10th ed. Springfield, MA.