

Advancing Auditory Abilities of New Listeners



Parents anxiously await their child's responses to sound when he gets hearing aids or cochlear implants. The process of learning to listen takes experience and time. Families are an essential part of that process. They use everyday occurrences to enjoy exploring sounds with their child. Parents can pause, expect the child to react and offer encouragement when he responds. They can also join in pointing out, locating and listening to sounds together.

As the child with a hearing aid or cochlear implant learns to listen, he progresses through four levels of audition: detection, discrimination, identification and comprehension. Audiologists set devices to provide the best awareness of sound while therapists and parents help the child strengthen his listening skills. A child develops interest in listening as he reacts to, searches for and recognizes sounds.

Detection

Detection is awareness of sound. A child might enjoy playing with a toy and notice the music it makes. He does not yet understand the meaning of that sound or how it may differ from others. When he hears his musical toy he might glance upward or look around. As he becomes more aware he may search for other sounds he hears.

Many sounds occur naturally throughout a child's day. A child can be gently guided to attend to varied sounds when they happen. Families do not need to frequently present sounds to determine if the child hears.

They can build their child's awareness of voices by showing him when big brother is calling to him, baby sister is crying or grandma is talking.

Discrimination

With experience a child discriminates between sounds. He realizes that sounds differ although he still does not know what each means. When he is playing with a musical toy but looks up if people nearby begin to talk, he is discriminating the difference between sounds.

Families can guide their child to learn sound discrimination. They might aid him in identifying if the microwave beeps in a noisy kitchen when other sounds are occurring. To help a child discriminate a specific speech sound, parents might sometimes carefully emphasize it while continuing to use a normal tone and pace. For example if the child is learning the 'sh' sound, a parent might say "sh-sh-shush, the baby is napping."

Identification

A child begins to identify sounds as he associates them with specific actions or objects. This skill often occurs almost at the same time as the discrimination stage. When a child knows that the sound of his musical toy is different from other sounds, he quickly begins to identify what each sound represents. He might hear his musical toy and run to find it.

Families help with sound identification by aiding a child to find the source of a sound. They might guide him to look for the loud garbage truck when it arrives regularly. Later when he hears it, the child initiates going to window to see the truck. He does not yet know that the truck picks up garbage but he identifies its sound. Parents can also assist a child with identifying some speech sounds by using a sing-song voice for certain words. They might say, "Do you want to be picked up? Up, up, up?" Although the child does not know the meaning of the words, he raises his arms because he associates that tone with being picked up.

Comprehension

When a child comprehends a sound, he responds with appropriate action or language. He understands the meaning of specific sounds

and how to react to them. At this stage, a child would recognize the sounds of his musical toy and the actions that can accompany its tunes. When he hears the musical toy's sounds, he starts movements the family has been doing for that song. For example, when the toy plays the pony song, he pretends to ride a horse. He is able to act on his identification of a sound.

A child is guided through the comprehension stage when families help him understand a sound and respond. A parent might explain when the buzzer for the dryer rings, that the clothes are ready to go in the laundry basket for the child to help sort. Over time a child could demonstrate his comprehension of the meaning of that sound by getting the laundry basket when the dryer buzzes. Guiding a child to comprehend speech is done when families talk about an object, look at it and use the word in various situations. An example would be if they do this on many occasions for shoes, eventually when the child is asked to get his shoes, he demonstrates comprehension by looking for them.

Additional strategies families can use to encourage listening include:

- singing often, inventing tunes and enjoying musical activities
- imitating natural sounds that are meaningful and interesting
- using varied voice patterns and typical facial expressions
- talking within three feet of the child's device microphone
- communicating in meaningful short sentences and phrases
- using longer sentences as the child's understanding grows

A child is encouraged to develop his auditory skills when families provide experiences and enthusiasm for fun listening. He becomes more attentive to sound and curious about new sounds. The child may indicate if his device is on or off and when the battery is not working. His responses to hearing tests could increase in accuracy. A child's spoken language will improve as he understands speech sounds in words. With much practice and encouragement, a child gradually grows from a new listener to one with advanced auditory abilities.