

Social Development Intervention for the DOE ASD Nest Program
Unit 2: Gathering Information and Active Listening

(November & December)

“Just as any one food is not nutrition, words alone are not communication. Put all the team heads together to determine ... his social language pragmatics teaching needs. Actively teach him to understand body language, facial expression, vocal nuances. He will not ‘just pick it up’ as he goes along. It requires perpetual integration. Every teacher, every setting, every day.”¹

-Ellen Notbohm

Just as actively listening is a prerequisite to learning with others, it is also an expectation in social interactions. Along with listening, social exchanges and group learning require gathering the provided information, combining known information and then sharing one's thinking. The ICT classroom asks all students to *think together*, as school is in essence about shared learning. Therefore in SDI we encourage situations and focus on abilities that motivate our students to share an imagination, which we believe supports shared learning and ultimately give our students greater access to the curriculum.

When discussing conversation in the elementary classroom, Ardith Davis Cole says this: “(We need to) advocate listening ‘between the lines’ as someone speaks, hearing the feelings and intentions as well as the words. Thus, participants finish each other’s sentences, mirror the gestures of other group members, back off and reenter with grace and finesse, and examine a topic from a variety of avenues, grounding their thoughts in sound evidence²”. This is from a book that supports the reading programs in

many NYC DOE schools. These are the expectations of listening in the classroom. For a neurotypical child this is instinctual, or requires only that we draw attention to these skills for them to be utilized. However, for our students with ASD such nuances are not so accessible and require much more than simple reminders; they need to be highlighted, modeled, explored, and then highlighted, modeled, explored to develop.

Classroom instruction demands language skills such as making inferences, understanding abstract concepts, *and* exchanging information. These require listening, then processing, and finally making use of gathered information in order to move on to the next step. As educators giving instruction to a diverse group of students, first understanding these demands of the classroom enables us to make adjustments and to “teach our children the way that they learn.” We differentiate both social and academic instruction to encourage shared learning. This supports the ASD child’s unique way of learning and gathering information.

Some of the greatest challenges for students with ASD are reading non-verbal cues (facial expressions, body language), regulating sensory input, listening with the whole body, and tying memory to emotion (episodic memory), all of which are required to listen actively and gather information. These challenges coupled with difficulties processing language can compromise quick responding in the classroom or complicate what is already demanding in conversation. You may notice that for many of our students, this type of processing can lead to focusing on minor or non-essential details in an experience and overlooking the important clues or the gestalt of the message.

¹ Notbohm, E. *Ten things your student with autism wishes you knew* Future Horizons, 2006 p 55

² Cole, Ardith Davis. Knee to Knee, Eye to Eye: Circling In on Comprehension Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, 2003 p 5

Moreover, students with ASD may not glean the importance of emotional content and therefore lose the salient aspects of that experience. Without memories of the emotional consequences of an experience, students may repeat an unpleasant episode or one with little meaning, over and over again. By the same token, the recall of pleasurable experiences can be lost, so students are less likely to replicate a similar event in order to achieve another positive moment and build common memories with another. Tying the emotion of an experience to the memory increases its value and richness.

A neurotypical child is hardwired to gather social information but ASD children are not and need support in learning *how* and *why* others are necessary for social exchanges. In Unit 1, we set the stage to support the development of active listening. First we set-up situations that encourage experience sharing (literally having an experience with others), then reinforce those memories by recalling them together, as a group. By encouraging students to interact we are helping them build a foundation that supports active listening. We support memory building by emphasizing the social aspects of the event and our experience of them. Reviewing photographs, video, and providing an unforgettable label for an event are valuable strategies. These support students' growing awareness of the emotional content of the experience, thereby enhancing episodic memory.

As we develop these social pragmatic abilities and students become ready cognitively, we can begin to support *how* to listen in different situations. We can promote social awareness by highlighting the fact that others have thoughts and then begin our more direct use of social cognition.

Developing and improving active listening for information gathering is the focus of Unit 2. We look at what supports the student needs to gather information from his or her environment, from

their texts, and from others. Gathering information in any situation can be strengthened by using past experiences and comparing them to a present context. With the use of the GPS, educators' can evaluate children's listening abilities, and then provide the tools that they need to work towards active listening. Strategies discussed in this unit may be used to address children's needs at all levels from referencing and joint attention, to the more complex concepts of "thinking with our brains as well as our eyes", "whole body listening", and thinking about what other people think"². The modeling of concepts and direct exploration of concepts for older children is incorporated into the day and reinforces both social development and thinking.

Vocabulary & Concepts UNIT 2

Listening with your Whole Body
"Thinking with your Eyes"
"We're connected" (thinking together)
Sharing an imagination
"Her eyes are telling me..."
"His face (or body) is telling me..."
45-second rule (*for adult listening*)
Additional for 3rd-5th
"Thinking with your Brains"
"Brainmatch" "Thinking the same thing"
"Social Smarts"
Active Listening
"Social Clues"
"Smart Guess" / "Wacky Guess"
Hidden Social Highlight
Additional for MS/HS
Hidden Curriculum
Figuring out someone's plan
Smart Guesses about someone's Intention
(body language)

² Winner, Michelle Garcia, Think Social, section 2 p.59