

CORE SKILL: COMMUNICATE

Listening and Understanding



What You Need to Know

Infants are surrounded by new and interesting sounds. They get excited by lively high-pitched voices and are soothed by lower quieter ones. Before babies speak their first words, they attend to sounds and understand the meaning of simple words. For example, an infant may move their eyes in the direction of a sound, turn to their own name when you call, and begin responding to simple words and phrases such as, “Bye-bye,” or, “come here.” You can support infants’ listening and understanding skills through your daily exchanges with them – singing, reading books, talking to them, and playing sensory games to explore different ways to make sounds.

Things to Consider

Infants express their listening and understanding skills through gestures, sounds, and movements. For instance, a 3-month-old child may startle at loud sounds and quiet or smile when their caregivers talk. Typically, a 6-month-old pays attention to music and notices toys that make sounds. Infants approaching their first year may look when you point and listen to songs and stories for a short time. Older infants can typically point to a few body parts when you ask, or point to pictures in books when you name them. For this reason, it is important to observe and be attuned to infants’ listening and understanding skills.

Development of Children’s Listening and Understanding

Between birth and 9 months, infants may:	Between 8 and 18 months, infants may:
Attend to verbal and nonverbal communication by turning toward or looking at a person.	Show understanding of the meaning of familiar caregivers’ verbal and nonverbal communication.
Participate in reciprocal interactions by exchanging facial expressions and language sounds with familiar adults.	Respond with facial expressions, gestures, words, or actions, such as looking at people or objects being referred to.
Look at familiar people, animals, or objects when they are named such as, “mama,” “puppy,” or, “ball.”	Follow simple directions (e.g., roll the ball, or kiss the baby).

Setting the Stage

Activities and materials that support the development of listening and understanding skills:

- ◆ Read and discuss books. With older infants, encourage them to point to pictures in the book when you name them.
- ◆ Sing songs or repeat simple rhymes.
- ◆ Play with toys or objects that make distinct noises. Jingle, tap, or shake them for the infant if needed.
- ◆ Play one-on-one games that require infants to listen and understand (e.g., peek-a-boo, pat-a-cake).



Intentional Teaching Practices to Support Listening and Understanding

OBSERVE	OBSERVE Take time to notice how infants express their listening and understanding skills (e.g., gestures, movements, and sounds). Do some of them seem especially interested in interacting with toys and objects that make sounds, while others prefer to listen to songs and rhymes? Consider who would benefit from extra support.
FOCUS	Use Gestures and/or Sounds to Encourage Listening Encourage infants to listen by making gestures and sounds to help focus their attention. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Use gestures along with the words that you say. For instance, during snack time, tell infants, “It’s time to eat,” and tap your lips (<i>exaggerate the gesture if needed to make sure infants saw it</i>).◆ Sing simple songs while including corresponding hand gestures such as “Wheels on the Bus” or “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.”◆ Look at and point to objects when talking with infants. For example, when reading a story about a puppy, point to the picture of the puppy in the book, and say, “Look! Puppy!”◆ Show an infant a bell and then gently ring it so they can hear. Model listening skills by imitating the sound of the bell, “Ding, dong, ding, dong.”
SCAFFOLD I	Ask and Answer Questions to Support Understanding Ask questions to prompt back-and-forth exchanges with infants. You may end up answering your own questions, and that’s okay! The question is a way to capture their attention and encourage their listening and understanding. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ During Choice Time, play “So Big” with an infant. Ask them, “How big is the baby?” Then lift their arms up into the air and say, “Sooooo big!” to focus their attention on your question. Infants love this game and will eventually lift their arms in response to your question.◆ When singing a lullaby while rocking an infant, add pauses to “ask” them to fill in the blank. For instance, “Happy naptime to you, happy naptime to... you!”◆ With older infants, ask simple questions (e.g., “Who’s that?” or, “Where’s your shoe?”) and allow pauses to give them the chance to respond through sounds, gestures, and/or words.
KEEP IT GOING	Consider what you learned from observing infants as well as their reaction to your Focus and Scaffolds. Find ways to intentionally support their listening and understanding skills throughout the day.