

# CORE SKILL: COMMUNICATE

## Listening and Understanding



### *What You Need to Know*

Young children’s language skills develop in ways that help them understand and respond to increasingly long and complex forms of communication, such as stories, explanations, multi-step directions, or abstract questions. They begin to appreciate humor, metaphorical language, and the *intent* of a message that goes beyond the literal (e.g., silliness, exaggeration). To comprehend these increasingly complex forms of communication, preschoolers must learn to use their knowledge of the world, vocabulary, and active listening skills together. You can support the development of these complex language skills by guiding their thinking through questions and comments and encouraging and supporting active listening through modeling and supports, like gestures or pictures that pair to the text in stories you are sharing.

### *Things to Consider*

One of the best ways to build listening and understanding skills is to tell stories or read to young children. Understanding stories requires children to attend to and understand lengthy passages of language that often involve abstract ideas, events in the past or future, or language that creates an imaginary world. This type of language is different and more sophisticated than the language used in everyday, face-to-face conversation. As children learn to attend to and comprehend stories and books, they not only build the communication skills of listening and understanding, but they are creating a foundation that research shows is essential to reading comprehension skills down the road.

### *Development of Listening and Understanding*

Between 36 and 48 months, children may:	Between 48 and 60 months, children may:
Show acknowledgment of comments or questions and be able to attend to conversations, either spoken or signed.	Show acknowledgment of complex comments or questions.
Understand increasingly longer sentences, simple questions, and simple stories.	Be able to attend to longer, multi-turn conversations (spoken or signed).
Retell 2–3 key events from a well-known story, typically in the right temporal order and using some simple sequencing terms.	Show an understanding of complex statements, questions, and stories containing multiple phrases and ideas.
Answer basic questions about likes or dislikes in a book or story, ask and answer questions about main characters or events in a familiar story, and make predictions about events that might happen next with adult support.	With support, provide basic answers to specific questions about details of a story (e.g., who, what, when, or where), and answer inferential questions about stories.

### *Setting the Stage*

Activities and materials that support the development of children’s listening and understanding:

- ◆ Listening Center with stories, songs, and poems children can listen to (with no visual computer or book).
- ◆ Listening Game that requires children to listen and integrate multiple pieces of information. Games such as Simon Says (with multiple parts, “Simon says, touch your head and then jump on one leg”) or I-Spy (where multiple clues are given at one time, “I-Spy something green that is a food”).
- ◆ Books that involve a complex chains of events, that feature abstract ideas (e.g., friendship, emotions, science), that build world or domain knowledge (e.g., science, books on topics about the world like farms or cities), and books involving abstract language (e.g., poems, metaphors, exaggeration, dialogue).
- ◆ Shared activities that encourage children to listen to others (e.g., show and tell, small group peer sharing, partner play).



# Intentional Teaching Practices to Support Listening and Understanding

OBSERVE	<p><b>OBSERVE</b></p> <p>How do children show you what they know/understand? Do they follow directions easily? Do they attend to and understand conversations among peers or with adults? Do they actively engage in stories as seen by facial expression, body language, comments, and/or questions?</p>
FOCUS	<p><b>Use Gestures and/or Visual Supports to Encourage Listening</b></p> <p>Focus children's attention by providing gestures and visual supports to encourage listening and sequencing of information.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ <b>Giving directions:</b> "There are three things we all need to do before we go to the library. First... (<i>hold finger up</i>) <u>pick up</u> our workspace (<i>use finger to make a pinching/pick-up gesture</i>). Second... (<i>hold up two fingers</i>) <u>walk</u> to our cubbies to get our books (<i>make the fingers walk as a corresponding gesture</i>) and third... (<i>hold up three fingers</i>) <u>line up</u> (<i>push three fingers into a 'line'</i>)."</li> <li>◆ <b>Reading a story:</b> "In this book, we are going to hear a lot about a naughty duck. The duck does a lot of giggling and gets other animals on the farm to join the fun. Listen for when the duck says, "Giggle, Giggle," and for when other animals join in. Raise your hand when you hear me read those parts!"</li> </ul>
SCAFFOLD I	<p><b>Ask and Answer Questions to Support Understanding</b></p> <p>Focus on questions that help children make connections between events or use events to predict.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ <b>During a story to understand a character's motivation or feeling:</b> "Oh no! They crumpled up their drawing?! Why did they do that? When their brother came in and laughed how did they feel?"</li> <li>◆ <b>During a story to support reasoning and predicting:</b> "When he says, 'I ain't going to paint no more,' he tells us he knows he <i>should</i> stop painting. But each time he sees something on his body – his hand or head – he paints! Here he did it again! What do you think his mama is going to say?"</li> <li>◆ <b>During a content activity (such as science) to link a new idea to something they may know or you may have taught:</b> "As we are walking, tell me what you observe about the clouds. We have been learning a lot about clouds. What do you know about the dark clouds in the sky today?"</li> </ul>
SCAFFOLD II and III	<p><b>Draw Explicit Attention to the Structure of Stories or Information</b></p> <p>Help children listen with intention by drawing explicit attention to the structure of stories or information. Additionally, reference these structures to help children retell or summarize information.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ <b>Draw attention to the narrative plot as a structure:</b> "This book is about a little ant. He will travel to new places. Each new place will bring a new lesson. Let's listen for each new place and lesson."</li> <li>◆ <b>Sequence of events as structure:</b> "So in the beginning, he... Okay, then in the middle, he... Now let's listen to see what happens at the end."</li> <li>◆ <b>Structure of information sharing:</b> "Today we will share our art. Each person will explain two things: what you drew, and why you drew it!"</li> </ul> <p><b>Ask Children to Summarize or Retell Information</b></p> <p>Prompt children to summarize or retell information. When applicable, reference specific structures of stories or information you previously drew explicit attention to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ "Today, we observed worms. Then we decided to focus on how they looked and how they moved their bodies (structure that was set up prior to observation). Tell me what you observed."</li> <li>◆ "Yesterday, we learned about how worms help the earth (structure set up for listening). Can anyone remember what we already know about worms from yesterday?"</li> <li>◆ "Okay, we were listening as our partners described what they drew and why they drew it. Can you tell us what your partner said?"</li> </ul>
KEEP IT GOING	<p>Consider what you learned from observing children on Monday as well as their reaction to your Focus and Scaffolds. Find ways to build the activities in the Setting the Stage into your regular routines.</p>