



## **Why Can't My Child Just Listen?**

By Linda Balsiger, M.S., CCC-SLP

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Do you ever feel like you're repeating yourself until you're blue in the face? Does your child appear to be listening, but not follow through correctly? Does your child actually have a listening disorder, or are they just not paying attention? While it is normal for kids to have occasional listening problems, particularly in times of distraction or stress, when those problems begin to interfere with following directions at school or learning through verbal instruction, it is time to consider whether there is a more serious problem. The following are some of the disorders that may underlie listening problems.

### **Attention**

Attention is a common culprit when a child doesn't appear to be listening. This may be due to distraction (internal or external), or a longer transition time needed to switch attention when someone begins speaking. Some children have attention weaknesses, while others have attention deficits that reach the level of a clinical disorder (ADD/ADHD). Other symptoms of an attention disorder include: difficulty focusing, a high level of distractibility, problems working independently, a need for frequent breaks, and a tendency to become easily overwhelmed. Children with attention disorders often learn better with 1:1 instruction than group instruction. An attention disorder can be diagnosed by a pediatrician or psychologist. Even if parents elect not to pursue medication, a diagnosis can help their child to get the additional supports and accommodations they need to succeed at school.

### **Auditory Processing Disorder**

Auditory Processing Disorder (APD) or Central Auditory Processing Disorder (CAPD) is a disorder of the auditory system, not of the speech-language system. It is a deficit in the central nervous system's processing of auditory information. Children with APD often have other symptoms besides listening issues, including understanding speech in background noise and distinguishing similar speech sounds. This disorder can affect not only listening, but reading, spelling, and understanding of language, since these require skills in recognizing and distinguishing speech sounds. Diagnosis of an auditory processing disorder often involves a multi-disciplinary team, including a psychologist and a speech-language pathologist, so that other cognitive or speech-language problems can be ruled out. However, an actual diagnosis of APD can only be made by an audiologist, using a series of specialized tests in a sound-treated room. Treatment of APD may include environmental adaptations, compensatory strategies, and direct remediation of the disorder itself.

### **Receptive Language Disorder**

Listening problems are sometimes due to a receptive language disorder. This disorder affects comprehension of spoken language, and sometimes written language as well. Children with a receptive language disorder might also have difficulty expressing their



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thoughts fluently - verbally or in writing. Receptive language problems may be due to difficulties understanding the syntactical structures in sentences, the semantics (meaning) of phrases or vocabulary words, or the morphology of word forms and how they change meaning (*e.g. similar, dissimilar*). Children with these disorders typically have difficulty when spoken language is delivered in long chunks or in complex forms. Some children are not diagnosed with receptive language disorders until they reach higher grades, because they meet earlier developmental language milestones normally. As their skills fail to keep pace with their chronological age, parents and teachers may attribute their problems to not listening. However in higher grades, students encounter more advanced vocabulary words, longer sentences, and more complex syntactical structures. These problems can also affect reading comprehension, since written material typically contains more complex syntax than spoken language. Diagnosis and treatment of a receptive language disorder is performed by a speech-language pathologist.

### **Auditory Memory**

Children with auditory memory deficiencies lack sufficient working memory to “hold” longer chunks of language in memory for processing. They tend to “lose” the first or last part of a sentence, and have difficulty remembering specific details in the sentence. Tests of auditory memory can be administered by a psychologist or speech-language pathologist. Treatment approaches for memory include direct strengthening of auditory memory, identification and isolation of critical elements in a sentence, visualization techniques, compensatory strategies, and communication repair skills. Teachers and parents can also learn to deliver spoken information in ways that maximize the listening capabilities of these students.

### **Concerns?**

Sometimes it is easy for parents to think “Just pay attention!” It is important to recognize that some attention and listening problems are beyond a child’s ability to compensate for, and professional help is needed. As children move into higher grades, listening and language comprehension skills become increasingly important for academic success. If your child is having listening or comprehension problems at school or at home, it may be time to try to find out what is underlying their difficulties.

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