



# Hearing VS LISTENING

Many people use the words hearing and listening interchangeably, but did you know they mean different things? Hearing is one of our five senses which is a passive, involuntary action which requires no effort. Listening is an active and voluntary action that requires effort and intentional interpretation of what we are hearing.

When we listen, we need the brain to process what has been heard and make meaning of the sound. Extracting meaning from sound is called auditory processing. When we are young, we develop these auditory processing skills as our brain learns to assign meaning to different sounds. It takes a lot of practice to learn to tune in to important information and block out unimportant sound throughout the early years of childhood.

## Ear Infections and Listening

Throughout early childhood, it is common for babies and toddlers to develop ear infections in the middle ear system. This causes fluid to build up behind the eardrum, often causing a temporary hearing loss. Having fluid in the middle ear system can sound like you are listening underwater. Having a temporary hearing loss or middle ear fluid can interfere with a child's ability to learn to listen. Often children will not develop the skill of filtering out unwanted background noise, which can go on to affect their ability to understand conversations in noise when they are older. This can occur even when the hearing returns to normal and the ear infection resolves. This can be described as an auditory processing disorder. The good news is that you can teach your child to develop skillful listening, even if they do experience middle ear infections.

# WHAT YOU CAN DO

To support your child in developing their listening skills, there are actions you can take to ensure they can hear and listen well from any age:

1. Get your child's attention before speaking – you can do this by saying their name first.
2. Be face to face with your child when you speak to them, maintaining eye contact and staying within 2 metres when talking.
3. If you feel as though your child has not understood you, check with them by asking them to repeat it to you. Try rephrasing the statement rather than repeating the same message.
4. While we understand it can be frustrating if you feel as though your child is ignoring you, avoid the temptation to shout. This only distorts your message making it more difficult to understand. They may want to understand you but simply cannot.
5. Respond to your child when they are talking to you to show that you are listening. This will encourage your child to mimic their parents and do the same thing.
6. Encourage listening through reading story books and playing music or nursery rhymes. The more exposure your child has to sound and listening activities, the more enjoyable and easier it will be to develop listening skills.
7. Finally, if you are concerned about your child's listening skills, speak to an auditory processing specialist. This will be an audiologist or speech pathologist who can assess your child's auditory processing and provide you with specific ways to improve your child's listening skills.