

Learning to Listen Two Activities to Build Skills

by Pamela Civins

Imagine having a conversation with a person whose opinions and beliefs are completely opposite your own. How would you build a mutually respectful relationship with that person?

What do you need to do in order to get beyond your disagreements?

Most of us have developed opinions or beliefs about hundreds of topics. Most of us also have a lot to say about what we think and we want people to hear what we're saying. The challenge is not only to talk, but also to be heard. This means that not only do we and whomever we are speaking with have to talk, but more importantly, each person involved in a conversation needs to listen. Listening is a difficult skill to master. In fact, I'm sure that few of us that have mastered the art of listening. Really listening means that we have to put our own opinions and beliefs aside and hear what the other person is saying. How many of us can really do this well? It takes a lot of practice and attention to listen to others, especially when we might not like what they are saying.

Try these activities to build your and your students' listening skills. The better you get, the more you'll be able to prevent and resolve conflict.

Active Listening

Hand out Four Ways to Listen Effectively (on page 22) and go over it with your students. If you prefer, you can go over the concepts presented in this handout verbally instead of having students read it.

1. Ask students to break into pairs and take turns as listener and speaker.
2. The speaker should talk briefly (3-5 minutes) about something that is important to him or her.
3. The listener should practice active listening, trying to follow the suggestions on the handout. When the speaker has finished, the listener should try to restate or summarize what the speaker has just said. It is not important to use the exact same words as the speaker. What is important is to capture the speaker's meaning and feelings. The listener should not interrupt the speaker while s/he is speaking unless the listener is trying to clarify something.
4. When the listener has finished the summary, the speaker should decide whether the listener heard her or him fully. If the speaker feels that anything important was missing from the listener's summary, s/he should say it again.
5. The listener should then summarize what the speaker just said was missing.
6. Continue this process until the speaker feels fully heard.
7. Switch roles.
8. Ask students to reflect on their roles. What did it feel like to be heard? What was it like to listen in this way? What was hard for them? What came easily? When could they try to do this in their day-to-day lives?

Opposite Sides of the Issue

This activity is much harder than the first one because the listener and speaker will have opposing views of an issue. Follow the same process as in the Reflective Listening activity, only this time, have students talk about an issue that is controversial. Students should have different views of the issue. If you like, you can ask two student volunteers to do this in front of the class with other class members acting as observers. Ask the observers to work on using their listening skills even though they won't participate in summarizing what they heard. Observers should also watch what is happening between speaker and listener such as paying attention to body language.

Reflection questions for participants

- What did you learn about yourself through this activity?
- What did you think you did well?
- At what moments did you feel you stopped listening to your partner? Why so you think this happened?
- Did you learn something new about this issue by listening in this way?

Reflection questions for observers

- What did you notice about how each person listened to the other?
- What did each person do well?
- Did you hear anything that wasn't reflected in the listener's summary?
- Did you learn anything about the issue by listening in this way?



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To learn more about listening, visit the International Listening Association at <www.listen.org>. Here you will find resources, a listening self-assessment tool you can take online, facts and quotes about listening, and newsletters and articles that can help you assess and improve your listening skills.