

Smart kids, dumb classrooms

By Damien Howard ©
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Children with listening problems learn and cope better at school when teaching styles match their preferred learning styles. If the teaching styles do not match their learning styles, children with listening problems often experience stress and anxiety in classrooms where the focus is on auditory teaching. The school experiences of children with listening problems who are not given the opportunity to learn in the ways most comfortable for them are discussed in this article.

Children with listening difficulties often experience stress at school. Firstly, noise itself can be stressful and schools are inevitably noisy places because they bring many children together in the same place. School rules restrict children's capacity to escape from what they experience as excessive noise. High noise levels increase stress hormones for those without auditory processing problems. Those with auditory processing difficulties can often be more sensitive to noise, in addition to this they have trouble with speech perception when it is noisy, so they experience more stress. Because they have to work harder to follow what is said, they often tire quickly or don't cope. The challenge of coping with spoken instruction means that at the end of a lesson, or by the end of the day, children may be exhausted and emotional. For some children, this may lead to behavioural problems, poor school performance, or shyness and reluctance to participate in lessons or other class activities. These responses may represent strategies to avoid obviously failing the listening challenges at school.

FRUSTRATED

Kids can be very smart at finding ways to avoid being seen to fail the listening challenges in auditory focussed classrooms. On the other hand, some children may be quiet and compliant at school but go home frustrated and upset, and it is the parents who have to work out what the problem is and manage it, or manage their tantrums. Unfortunately, many teachers find it hard to believe that ordinary classroom experiences can have such an impact, especially if the problems are not evident at school.

It is not only in classrooms that children with listening problems face difficulties. For children with poor listening skills,

playground noise levels can often inhibit their participation in the normal social interaction. They may feel that they are being excluded, or that others don't want to play with them. For these children, managing social interaction is already stressful enough before some teachers' highly verbal teaching styles exacerbate the challenges at school. The anxiety created by these challenges may lead them into fights, or they may withdraw and become socially isolated from their peers and teachers.

Moreover, as children progress through school, teaching becomes increasingly dependent on aural language and literacy skills. Children with listening problems may have experienced difficulties with the phonics skills that are important when they are learning to read. The pressure of the growing demands on their listening and literacy skills in schools with high levels of background noise, in buildings that often have poor acoustics, and in noisy playgrounds, fosters further stress, anxiety and self-doubt. It is all too easy for them to misunderstand what is said and they may have difficulty explaining themselves.

JUDGEMENTS

Children's verbal and listening performance is the basis for judgements about many things; for example, their intelligence, their capacity for learning, their social skills and their personality. Children learn early the consequences of not understanding, of misunderstanding, and of being slower than others in their ability to process what is said. They get things wrong, appear stupid, and are all too readily shamed and teased by others. The challenges they face are usually invisible to their teachers and peers. Others may not realise that situations, where they themselves feel quite comfortable, may be highly stressful for someone with listening problems.

Other articles in this newsletter describe how visual teaching strategies can help children with listening problems and limit the extent to which auditory focussed classrooms can often undermine their confidence. Part of the process is as follows.

Children who have difficulties learning through listening may use observation of others to know what to do.

As well as observing what they need to do they also see that others can cope better with verbal instructions.

This fosters a cognitive style where they

constantly compare their performance with that of others and reach the conclusion that 'I must be dumb'.

This is a very damaging self-belief that undermines their confidence and capacity as learners. In reality, it is the auditory focussed classrooms that are 'dumb', not the child, because, in these classrooms, the children with listening difficulties are not being given the learning opportunities that they need to succeed.

MINIMISE

Teachers can do a number of things at school to minimise the stress on children with listening difficulties. If you are a teacher you can

- use the type of teaching styles that are outlined in articles in this newsletter;
- manage the listening demands in your classroom by using
 - alternative visual information sources and
 - activities that provide a break from the need to listen;
- consider using a classroom sound field amplification system- see article on my website www.eartroubles.com ;
- foster predictability so children can rely on routines to reduce the listening demands they face;
- prepare children in advance for any change, or for the unexpected;
- be aware that both behaviour problems and shyness may be outcomes of listening problems;
- foster a classroom environment where no child is seen as a failure;
- keep in contact with parents about what children say at home about their school experiences - a 'communication book' where parents tell teachers about things that happen at home can help);
- conduct a classroom 'listening audit' to identify times and places where communication is at risk - you can contact me for more information on how to do this.

Teaching in ways that support the preferred learning styles of children helps not only their school performance but also the way they feel about themselves and others. They fail less and they feel better about themselves and their whole school experience. They also end up feeling less frustrated and happier, which is good for their family life. There is online training available for parents and teachers of children with listening difficulties at www.eartroubles.com

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