



## Improving our Active Listening Skills

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“We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.”

Epictetus, Greek philosopher

Have you ever found yourself in a difficult situation with a family or at a team meeting, perhaps having to share some sensitive information or being confronted by an upset parent? In these types of situations, it's easy to let our emotions get the best of us and try to quickly “fix” the problem or concern. This can happen at the expense of first trying to really understand the problem or the key stakeholders' perspectives.

Instead of jumping in with solutions or information, it's helpful to stop and really listen to those involved in order to fully grasp all aspects of the situation. This type of approach involves “active listening”, and it is key for collaborative relationships. While we Hanen members are pretty good at OWLing, there are some guidelines for active listening that can help us become even better and more effective listeners.

### What is active listening?

Active listening can be described as:

“a multistep process, including making empathetic comments, asking appropriate questions, and paraphrasing and summarizing for the purposes of verification”

(McNaughton, Hamlin, McCarthy, Head-Reeves, & Schreiner, 2008).

McNaughton et al (2008) explain that the goal of active listening is to gain a clear understanding of the speaker's concern, and to be able to clearly communicate interest in the speaker's message.

At your Hanen workshop/s, you likely remember a discussion about active listening, as it promotes “more open and trusting relationships by increasing parents’ willingness to share their thoughts and feelings...” during videofeedback and review (Conklin, Pepper, Weitzman, & McDade, 2007, p. 623).

But why is all of this so important? Don’t we all already listen to the families and professionals with whom we work?

## Active listening – easier said than done

Well, in surveys of parents’ opinions on the matter, family-professional communication in early intervention is sometimes viewed as lacking in empathy and mutual respect (McNaughton et al, 2008). Despite widespread acceptance that the family’s involvement is critical for children’s outcomes, parents don’t always feel included in their child’s intervention. Reporting on parents’ perceptions of AAC intervention, Thistle & McNaughton (2015) explain that parents feel that speech language pathologists (SLPs) “do not regularly seek their input in the decision-making process, nor do communication professionals routinely support parents’ participation in the development of AAC systems” (p. 45).

These comments indicate that we still have a ways to go when it comes to family-centred practice and seeking family involvement at all levels of assessment and intervention. They also indicate that active listening may be easier said than done.

Active listening involves more than just sitting back, taking notes, and occasionally nodding your head while someone is talking.

It involves:

- conveying nonverbal involvement/immediacy through unconditional attention
- demonstrating awareness of the speaker’s intent by paraphrasing the content and feelings in the speaker’s message
- asking questions to acquire additional information about the speaker’s concerns

(Thistle et al, 2015)

Furthermore, we may not have received sufficient training about active listening and collaborating with others. The American Speech and Hearing Association (ASHA) standards require that SLPs complete a program that includes training in effective communication so that SLPs can recognize the needs and values of their clients, caregivers and team members (Thistle et al, 2015). But despite this, there is little information about how to best prepare SLP students to use effective communication strategies during their graduate programs. We

currently have a limited understanding of how active listening can be taught to individuals in the helping professions (Thistle et al, 2015).

## A framework for active listening

In order to fill this gap, McNaughton et al (2008) developed an active listening framework that could be used to teach this strategy to pre-service education professionals. In their 2008 study, significant improvements were noted for the targeted active listening skills with a group of undergraduate education professionals. Thistle et al (2015) applied the same active listening framework in a study of SLP students. The students learned active listening strategies and practiced applying them during simulated parent interactions (role plays) that depicted common concerns expressed by parents to SLPs working with young children who use AAC. After the active listening instruction, the SLP students scored significantly higher in their use of the active listening strategy. And when parents (who were blind to the purpose of the research) were asked to compare the SLP students' communication skills pre- and post-instruction, they made more positive comments and identified more positive behaviours during the post-instruction interactions.

## “LAFF, don’t CRY”

The framework developed by McNaughton et al (2008) is referred to “LAFF, don’t CRY”. The first part of the acronym (LAFF) represents the steps involved in active listening, and the second part (CRY) summarizes common pitfalls and things to avoid when actively listening:

### **LAFF:**

- **L**isten, empathize, and communicate respect
- **A**sk questions and ask permission to take notes
- **F**ocus on the issues
- **F**ind a first step

### **Don’t CRY:**

- **C**riticize people who aren’t present
- **R**eact hastily and promise something you can’t deliver
- **Y**akety-yak-yak

The framework is based on literature about effective communication skills for teachers and active listening (McNaughton et al, 2008). The following elaboration of this framework comes from McNaughton et al, 2008; McNaughton et al, 2010 & Thistle et al, 2015.

## **LAFF**

### **Listen, empathize, and communicate respect**

This first step involves gaining a better understanding of the speaker's perspective and communicating respect and empathy by:

- **making a statement that acknowledges the speaker's concern**, such as "That must be frustrating. Thank you for coming in to talk to me about this" or "I understand why you are concerned. Can you tell me more about...?"
- **using nonverbal behaviours** such as appropriate eye contact and body language like turning to face the speaker

### **Ask questions and ask permission to take notes**

The second step in the LAFF framework involves learning more about the speaker's perceived problem. This is accomplished by:

- **asking open-ended questions that communicate respect and gather information about how the speaker sees the problem**, such as "How long has this been a problem? Who else have you spoken with about this?" or "What happens when your son is at child care?"
- **taking notes** – asking permission to take notes communicates respect and that the listener takes the problem seriously. Note taking also enables the listener to gather sufficient written information needed to complete the next step in the process.

### **Focus on the issue**

Once sufficient information has been gathered, the listener can start to focus on the issue, which involves reviewing the information the speaker has conveyed. This is accomplished by:

- **summarizing the concern**, such as “I’d like to review what we’ve talked about”
- **checking for accuracy** – this allows the speaker to clarify or add further information and ensures both parties have a clear understanding of the concerns

### **Find a first step**

McNaughton et al (2010) suggest that most problems/concerns benefit from gathering additional information and careful thought, unless the child is in danger of being harmed or harming others. Therefore, when thinking about next steps, the listener is encouraged to:

- **consider areas for which additional information is required** – additional information can be gathered by talking to other professionals or key stakeholders, observing the child, etc
- **share the plan for gathering information and the rationale for doing so** (e.g. “As a first step, I’d like to talk to your child’s teacher and find out what she has noticed at daycare”)
- **identify a target date for a follow-up meeting**

## **DON’T CRY**

The second part of the framework describes inadvertent behaviours that are not helpful when trying to have an open, respectful conversation aimed at better understanding someone’s perspective:

### **Criticize people who aren’t present**

In an attempt to appear as a confidant and gain parents’ trust, it’s possible to end up in a situation where you criticize another professional (e.g. “Your son may not be responding well to his new ABA therapist because she’s not very animated” or “It sounds like your previous SLP didn’t have much experience with hearing impairment”). Sometimes this also happens in an attempt to lay blame when faced with a difficult problem. But instead of gaining a parent’s trust, this behaviour generally fuel’s the parent’s frustration.

### **React hastily and promise something you can’t deliver**

When the previous behaviour (criticizing others) fails to elicit the information needed to move on and establish next steps, it often results in reacting hastily and promising things that can't be delivered (e.g. "Maybe you can find another ABA therapist?").

### **Yakety-yak-yak**

In stressful situations, many of us talk to break the silence. This can result in getting off topic or offering information or strategies that aren't directly related to the problem (e.g. "I know how hard it is to have a teacher that doesn't 'get' your child. Last year, my child had a French teacher who always saw the worst in him...."). In addition, we often interrupt before the parent has finished what he or she is saying, which can limit the establishment of a trusting relationship.

Taken together, the "LAFF, don't CRY" framework provides us with strategies for effective active listening and warns us to beware of common pitfalls when trying to communicate about difficult situations.

## **Summary**

As members of a "helping profession", our instincts to help can sometimes encourage us to talk instead of listen. It's easy to jump in with suggestions and strategies instead of taking a step back to fully understand the situation.

Just as we encourage caregivers in our Hanen programs to OWL with children, we too should try to OWL as a first step when providing videofeedback or when collaborating with others. Observing, waiting, and listening to others encourages them to initiate, share information, and feel valued and connected with us. In terms of active listening, it means carefully observing and listening to what others have to say, and waiting before delivering our ideas and suggestions.

It can be difficult to remember the components of active listening. The LAFF, don't CRY framework offers an easy way to remember the steps involved with this strategy. But this strategy is definitely easier said than done, and takes much practice to master.

Actively listening can be particularly difficult in stressful situations, such as when delivering sensitive news or discussing emotional topics. For more information about this topic, our e-seminar "[Sharing Sensitive News](#)" provides tips about how to use active listening and several other skills to have difficult conversations with parents and professionals.

## *References*

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