Listening and questioning are essential skills that teachers use as part of their intentional teaching practices. These skills influence the degree of effective communication between teachers, children and other partners. They also enable teachers to find out about children’s interests: to understand their thinking and reasoning and ways of understanding the world.

**Attentive listening**

Many factors contribute to the ways that adults listen to and communicate with young children. Attentive listening is based on an image of a competent, capable child whose ideas have value and worth. Working from this perspective, teachers anticipate that children have interesting ideas to share and are likely to pay close attention to what is said. This sends a message to children that their ideas are valued and important, increasing the likelihood of children being willing to share their ideas. The reciprocity of this relationship is important, because the interactional style teachers use to engage children in meaningful exchanges can support learning or present barriers to sustained communication.

In 2006, Rinaldi¹ described attentive listening as being characterised by:

- a supportive listening context, one in which children feel empowered to express their ideas and theories, share knowledge that reflects their social and cultural experiences, and transform knowledge through their discussions with others. For children there is a sense of belonging to a community
- a desire to understand, an interest in exchanging ideas with children, their families and community to develop shared meanings
- an openness to ideas, respect for others’ perspectives and a willingness to change a point of view
- an active process occurring as listening generates questions, and always involving interpretations
- respect for those expressing their ideas
- potential to use all the senses
- attaching value to children’s conversations and providing time to express ideas.

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Effective questioning

Teachers use questions sensitively to engage children in problem solving, to encourage thinking, to reflect on experiences and to consider new ideas and information. Teachers’ use of responsive questioning skills is closely linked to attentive listening behaviours. They respect children’s knowledge and interests, and questions are framed to help understand a child’s view or way of thinking. In practice, teachers refrain from asking questions that invite narrow responses.

Instead they focus on questions that invite exploration and problem solving, and arouse curiosity. Such questions encourage more elaborate responses from children. In addition, they are likely to be of greater interest to children, as they provide opportunities for children to share their knowledge.

Some open-ended question starters have been provided to help teachers, parents and colleagues. These can be printed and displayed in the kindergarten room to prompt discussions.

Question starters

- What can you find out about …?
- How do you think …?
- How did that work out …?
- What did you use …?
- What happened when …?
- What do you think is going to happen …?
- What would it be like if …?
- How would it be different …?
- Suppose that …?
- What would change if …?
- What can you do next …?
- How can you check …?
- How do you know …?
- What could you say about this …?
- If you share this with a friend what will you say …?
- What will you say you found out …?
- What were the important parts …?
- How would it look differently if …?