

- **Listeners of the Lost Art**

Here Marina Strengell
reveals a number
of important points
based on her readings
over the years and her
own experience as
a mother and a teacher

In an ever visual world listening is indeed a lost art. But is anyone listening? Who cares? Parents and teachers probably do. Husbands and wives definitely should. Brothers and sisters, Friends and foes must do. When we engage in conscious qualitative listening we exercise faculties of the brain in such a way that is has been compared to “mental aerobics” This is because according to the experts, listening comes in “short sharp bursts” After this, we need to do something completely different. Our mind drifts off and lingers on other things and only when we are ready to listen again do we return to the act of listening.

As a teacher I often observe this phenomenon in the classroom. A child forgets himself, drifts onto other things and suddenly returns to the subject at hand asking for something to be repeated. Is the teacher expected to repeat what has already been said a few minutes ago? In a class of 25, should a teacher repeat something 25 times for pupils who each happen to be on a different listening band? Science informs us that most of us can listen for 6 – 8 minutes at a time. Anyone practicing on a daily basis can extend this time to 10 – 12 minutes. Yet as teachers we expect, even demand that children listen to us for 40 continuous minutes. 80 minutes during a double period! Based on this scientific fact is this expectation reasonable? Should we get angry with kids who can’t achieve it? Should we punish children for doing what comes naturally? Should we expect teachers to achieve what seems to be impossible? And it does seem impossible under the current education system with its current structure and current pressures and demands. Maybe, hopefully at some point in the future it will be re-evaluated to take into account these scientific truths.

Barbers and hairdressers have unwittingly mastered the art of listening. They manage to listen and be listened to just because they do it through mirrors where eye contact is indirect. So should teachers teach through mirrors? How can we learn to listen in the first place and how can we teach others to do so when nature is so predisposed against it? It takes great effort and energy to stop talking in the first place and even greater effort to stop listening to that familiar voice in your head before you can actually begin to actively listen to somebody else. As we say in Greek, “Na milas eine fysiko, Na siopas, theiko”

Our parents and teachers teach us the art of listening. It seems that this art can best be taught by example. If we want children to listen to us, then we have to listen to the children. In this way, children will like the feeling of being listened to and they will begin to value it. They will begin to connect it to the “feel good factor”. We often teach children to listen as a social skill but we have to balance this by listening to them as well. Unfortunately, this balancing act is not always easy to achieve since we are all busy mums and dads, stressed employees and overworked teachers. Often we don't have time to listen to the children due to various pressures. In a more and more visual world, the art of listening has become less valued – a lost art. The listening equation remains an unbalanced equation since we listen without being listened to. We are listened to without listening to others as well. Children do not get the positive input of being listened to and what can be a positive exchange of energy often becomes a tedious chore.

Experts say that when we observe children in the classroom chatting and muttering to themselves, what they are actually doing is processing information from one side of the brain to the other. They are putting their world into context and trying to make sense of it all. So, should we get angry with them for doing it? Or should we spend more time and energy finding ways to speak to them and better listen to them?

This is where extra curricular activities can play an important role. Teachers often notice that their relationship with pupils takes a turn for the better. These pupils are better disciplined and pay more attention during their lessons. The same can be said of school trips and school parties or any event that allows the

teacher to show a more personal interest in them. If you take the time to listen to them during your free time they will listen to you during lesson time. The same can be said of families. Relationships often improve after a holiday or a party or an event that has brought the family members together and allowed them to communicate in this way.

I am often reminded of the song 'The Sounds of Silence' by Paul Simon in which he says 'people talking without speaking, People hearing without listening'. It has actually taken me over 3 decades to understand that this is actually possible. We do talk without speaking. We do hear without listening. We should make a greater effort to stop talking 'at' the children as if they are objects and start to speak to them and with them. this is the only way they are going to learn to listen qualitatively. Otherwise, in the words of the singer 'Our words like silent raindrops fell and echoed in the wells of silence.' Have you ever wondered how many of your words actually fall like silent raindrops in the course of a day? The wells of silence must be overflowing in today's ever visual and less auditory world where the art of listening is lost in every respect. If we master the art by balancing the equation, we may even find the lost ark!

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