



STEP Curriculum Guidance- Listening

What is Listening?

Listening is a dynamic, active process that goes far beyond simply hearing words. As a participant, it means giving their full attention to whoever is speaking, tuning into their words, tone, facial expressions, and body language. It's about being present, patient, and open to their point of view without jumping in or judging. When participants listen well, they build trust with others, understand their motivations more deeply, and create space for meaningful conversations. It's not just about taking in information, but engaging with it, asking questions to clarify, reflecting on what's been said, and making sure the participant has understood correctly. When participants truly listen, they help others feel respected and valued, which makes learning and growing together much more powerful.

Different types of listening

Understanding the different types of listening helps coaches nurture communication and connection.

- Active Listening involves giving full attention to the speaker, showing interest through body language, and responding thoughtfully. It builds trust and shows respect.
- Empathetic Listening goes deeper by tuning into the speaker's emotions and perspective, helping young people feel understood and valued key for emotional growth and social bonding.
- Critical Listening encourages youth to evaluate what they hear, ask questions, and form reasoned opinions. This supports cognitive development and decision-making skills, especially in team settings and leadership roles.

Why is Listening important for our Young People?

Listening is a foundational skill for young people, particularly in environments that promote personal growth, teamwork, and emotional intelligence. It enables children to engage meaningfully with others, understand different perspectives, and regulate their own responses in social and learning contexts. Through active listening, young people develop empathy, improve their ability to follow instructions, and become more reflective in their communication. These skills are essential not only for success in sport but also for broader educational and interpersonal development. Coaches play a critical role in cultivating these competencies by modelling effective listening behaviours, such as attentiveness, patience, and non-judgmental engagement. In doing so, they create psychologically safe spaces where listening is valued and practiced. By consistently demonstrating and reinforcing good listening habits, coaches help young people internalise the importance of listening as a tool for connection, learning, and self-awareness.

Listening also really matters because:

- It helps keep participants safe by learning important information.
- It helps participants understand how someone else feels.
- It helps participants learn how to do things better.
- It helps participants understand new ideas.

References

1. As Wefald (2022) notes, effective listening is not only central to coaching but also to leadership, as it cultivates empathy, responsiveness, and ethical influence- [Coaching, Listening, and Leadership - Wefald - 2022 - Journal of Leadership Studies - Wiley Online Library](#)
3. Skills Builder- <https://www.skillsbuilder.org/universal-framework-steps/listening-step-1-focusing>

Why Listening without interrupting matters

Interrupting happens when you stop someone from speaking. This can be by talking over them, looking away, or doing something that shows you've stopped listening.

Sometimes there are good reasons why people interrupt:

- You're excited to share an idea.
- You want to say something quickly before you forget.
- You agree with the speaker and want to tell them.
- You're short on time.

But often, the reasons aren't good:

team for life

- You disagree and want to say your opinion.
- You're not interested in what they're saying.
- You're bored.

Interrupting can lead to problems:

- It can make the speaker feel like you don't care or find them boring.
- It shows you think your opinion is more important than theirs.
- You might miss something important they were going to say.
- Letting them finish might surprise you with something new or interesting.

What are Listening skills?

Listening is about being able to receive information through our ears and then thinking about it so that we understand what is being said. Listening doesn't necessarily always happen. We cannot listen if we do not try to, if anything is in the way of our ears, or if we are thinking about something else.

It can be useful to remind our participants that it is important to listen because:

1. We might learn information that helps to protect us, or to keep us safe.
2. We might understand how someone else is feeling about something.
3. We might learn how to do something better.
4. We might understand something new that we hadn't understood before.

We need to be focused in order to listen effectively. Introducing a simple listening model to participants about how to listen can be a good place to start.

Through our Coaching, where do we want our Participants to be?

Through our coaching, we aim to help young people build a strong set of communication skills that they can use in all kinds of situations, on and off the court/ field. One of the most important skills is **active listening**. This means helping participants learn how to fully focus on others when they're speaking, pick up on both verbal and non-verbal cues, and respond with empathy and understanding. Listening like this helps build trust, improves teamwork, and supports emotional intelligence skills that are essential for personal growth and positive relationships. Alongside listening, we also want to support young people in learning how to **express themselves clearly**, especially with people they know well. This helps them avoid miscommunication and builds confidence in sharing their thoughts. We encourage them to **contribute meaningfully to small group discussions**, which promotes collaboration and shared decision-making. We also help them learn how to **start purposeful conversations with new people**, which builds social confidence and adaptability.

Another key area is **structured expression**, supporting young people to organise their ideas logically so they can communicate clearly and with impact, whether they're speaking or writing. We also focus on **adaptive communication**, helping them adjust how they speak depending on who they're talking to and the situation they're in. This makes their communication more inclusive and relevant. Finally, we teach them to use **vocal tone, facial expressions, and body language** to reinforce their message and show intent, which strengthens their communication and supports emotional awareness.

All of these skills, anchored by strong listening, help young people grow in confidence, empathy, and self-awareness. They also give participants the tools to connect with others in meaningful ways, both now and in the future.

Skills Needed to develop Listening in Young People

1. Active Attention

Young people need to learn how to focus fully on the speaker, avoiding distractions and multitasking. This includes maintaining eye contact, using open body language, and showing verbal signs of engagement.

2. Empathy and Emotional Awareness

Listening involves understanding not just words but emotions. Developing empathy helps young people tune into how others feel, which improves relational depth and trust.

3. Verbal and Non-Verbal Interpretation

Recognising tone, facial expressions, and body language helps young people grasp the full meaning of what is being communicated.

4. Reflective Thinking

Encouraging young people to pause and think about what they have heard before responding helps deepen understanding and reduces reactive communication.

5. **Questioning and Clarification**

Teaching them to ask thoughtful questions or paraphrase what they have heard ensures they're interpreting messages accurately.

6. **Self-Regulation**

Listening requires managing impulses to interrupt, correct, or shift focus. Developing patience and emotional control is key.

7. **Adaptability**

Young people should learn to adjust their listening style depending on the context—whether it's a peer conversation, a coach's instruction, or a group discussion.

Listening as Coaches

In the context of Positive Youth Development (PYD), the ability of coaches to listen effectively is not merely a communication skill but a foundational aspect of their role as educators and mentors. Coaches serve as influential role models, and their listening behaviours, such as attentiveness, empathy, and responsiveness, set a standard for how young people learn to engage in interpersonal dialogue. When coaches demonstrate active listening, they model respect, psychological safety, and emotional intelligence, all of which are critical for fostering trust and openness within the coaching environment. This modelling is especially important for young participants, who are still developing their own social and emotional competencies. By consistently embodying good listening practices, coaches implicitly teach young people how to value others' perspectives, regulate their own responses, and contribute meaningfully to conversations. Thus, listening is not only a tool for effective coaching but also a pedagogical strategy that shapes the communicative culture of the team and supports the holistic development of young athletes.

1. Scholars emphasize that listening is not merely a technique but a stance, one that requires presence, emotional regulation, and the suspension of judgment
2. Deep listening, as framed by humanistic psychology, supports self-actualisation by validating the client's experience and encouraging reflective insight
3. Moreover, listening is foundational to coaching presence, which entails being fully attuned to the client's needs and resisting the impulse to solve or direct
4. Research also highlights that coaches must manage internal and external barriers—such as cognitive biases, emotional distractions, and environmental noise, to maintain the integrity of the listening process
5. Ultimately, listening in coaching is a disciplined practice that facilitates co-construction of meaning, enhances client agency, and contributes to sustained behavioural change

References for further reading:

- 1: Meza Bellota, C. (n.d.). *Active Listening: An Essential Skill for Coaching*. ICA Coach- <https://icacoach.com/coach-portfolios/research-papers/claudia-meza-bellota-active-listening-an-essential-skill-for-coaching/>
- 2: International Coaching Federation. (2023). *The Art of Listening in Coaching*- <https://coachingfederation.org/blog/the-art-of-listening-in-coaching/>
- 3: Attention & Listening Skills (NHS) <https://cambspborochildrenshealth.nhs.uk/speech-language-and-communication/attention-and-listening-skills/>
- 4: Adolescents learn about & practice active listening (Unicef)- <https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/media/35886/file>

How can participants Listen without interrupting?

With practice, participants can get better at not interrupting. At first, they will need to think about it on purpose, but over time it will become a habit.

- *Encourage participants to focus on staying quiet*, especially if they like to talk a lot.
- *Participants should focus on understanding* what the other person is saying.
- *Explain saying sorry if they interrupt* and let the person keep talking can help.
- *Participants should check the person has finished* before they start speaking.
- *Don't assume they know* what the other person is going to say.
- *Explain that they should not use every pause as a chance to talk*, the other person might just be thinking.
- If a participant must interrupt, like if time is running out or there's an emergency, show how to do it politely and say sorry.

Checking Participants are Listening

1. Active Engagement Checks

- Ask players to **reflect on what they heard**:
"What did your teammate say that helped you?"
"How did you know what to do in that drill?"
- Encourage **paraphrasing**:
"Can someone explain what Joe just said in their own words?"

2. Empathy-Based Listening

- Use activities that require **listening to understand**, not just respond.
 Example: In a team challenge, ask:
"What idea did your teammate share that you agreed with?"
"Did anyone hear something they hadn't thought of before?"

3. Leadership Through Listening

- Rotate roles where players must **listen first, then lead**.
 Example: A player listens to a strategy, then explains it to the group.
- Ask reflection questions like:
"How did listening help you lead better today?"

4. Peer Recognition

- Build a culture of **positive peer feedback**:
"Who listened really well today?"
"How did that help the team?"
- Use tokens or shout-outs for "Active Listener of the Day."

5. Growth-Oriented Reflection

- In your review circle, prompt players to connect listening with personal growth:
"What did you learn from someone else today?"
"How did listening help you improve your communication or teamwork?"

Coach reflection

1. **How present are you during coaching conversations?**
 Do I notice when my attention drifts, and how do I bring it back?
2. **What might be a barrier to a young person developing their listening skills?**
 How would I approach breaking down this barrier?
3. **How do you set up your sessions to encourage listening skills?**
 How will I identify if the way you set up your sessions encourages listening?
4. **What approaches do you have to work with young people when they don't seem to be listening etc.?**
 How will I identify if this works and is the right approach? Should I track this?
5. **Do you listen to understand or to respond?**
 Do I allow space for the participants thoughts to unfold before offering input?
6. **What assumptions might you make while listening?**
 How do these assumptions affect your interpretation of what is being said?
7. **How well do you pick up on non-verbal cues?**
 Do you notice shifts in tone, body language, or emotional energy?
8. **Do you create a psychologically safe space for the participants to speak openly?**
 How do your listening behaviours contribute to or hinder that safety?
9. **How often do you reflect or paraphrase to confirm understanding?**
 Do you check in with the participants to ensure you've truly grasped their meaning?
10. **Can you identify moments when your own biases or emotions interfere with listening?**
 Consider strategies you can use to manage these internal distractions?
11. **Do you adapt your listening style depending on the participants needs or communication style?**
 How flexible am you in my approach? Think about why it is important to be flexible?
12. **Have you received or asked for feedback about you listening skills?**
 How have you acted on that feedback?
13. **How does my listening impact the participants ability to reflect and grow?**
 What evidence do you see of listening contributing to transformational outcomes?

Knowledge areas to teach Participants

What listening is and why it matters (i.e. difference between hearing and listening)

Use pre-session briefings or team huddles to highlight the difference between simply hearing instructions and actively listening. Ask players to

repeat back key points or explain drills to a teammate to reinforce understanding. Use real-time examples during training to show how listening improves performance and safety.

Types of listening (active, empathetic, critical)

Design scenarios where players must use different types of listening. For example, use active listening during tactical discussions, empathetic listening during peer feedback or conflict resolution, and critical listening when analysing game footage or reviewing performance. Debrief after each to reflect on what type of listening was used and why it mattered.

Barriers to listening (i.e. distractions, assumptions, emotional reactions)

Create controlled distractions during drills (i.e. background noise, fast-paced instructions) and then reflect with players on what made listening difficult. Use group discussions to explore how emotions like frustration or overconfidence can block listening. Encourage players to identify their own listening challenges and develop personal strategies to manage them.

The impact of good listening on relationships, teamwork, and learning

Use team-based challenges that require clear communication and listening to succeed (i.e. blindfolded tasks, silent strategy games). Afterward, facilitate a reflection on how listening affected the outcome. Highlight moments in training or matches where good listening led to better decisions, stronger connections, or faster learning.

Listening as a leadership skill and its role in effective communication

Give players leadership roles in warm-ups, drills, or team talks, and encourage them to focus on listening to their teammates. Use peer feedback to highlight how listening helped them lead more effectively. Share examples of elite athletes or captains who are known for their listening skills and discuss how this contributes to their leadership.

Reference for further reading

<https://www.skillsbuilder.org/universal-framework/listening>

Developing Listening Skills in Young People

1. Model Active Listening

Coaches should consistently demonstrate focused listening during team talks, 121s, and feedback moments. Use eye contact, nodding, and verbal affirmations like 'I hear you' or 'Tell me more'. When players feel genuinely listened to, they're more likely to mirror that behaviour with teammates and coaches.

2. Create Opportunities for Practice

Design drills that require players to listen carefully to instructions or to each other, such as partner-based tasks, tactical walk-throughs, or 'silent coaching' activities where players must rely on verbal instructions from peers. Use games where players must repeat or act on what they've heard to reinforce listening under pressure.

3. Teach Listening Frameworks

Introduce simple models like active listening (focus, reflect, respond) or empathetic listening (listen to understand, not to reply). Use real training examples to show how listening at different 'levels' (i.e., to instructions, to feedback, to emotion) can impact performance and team dynamics.

4. Use Reflective Questions

After drills or matches, ask players questions like:

- 'What did you notice about your teammate's tone or body language?'
- 'Did you listen fully before responding?'
- 'How did your listening affect the outcome of that play or decision?'

Use these prompts in team huddles or individual reflections.

5. Feedback and Observation

Observe players during team talks and peer interactions. Give specific feedback on their listening behaviours, i.e., 'I noticed you waited and let your teammate finish before responding, that showed great patience.' Use peer feedback tools or video playback to highlight listening strengths and areas for growth.

6. Encourage Silence and Pausing

Build in moments of silence during sessions, after a question, before a response, or during reflection. This helps players get comfortable with pausing to think and shows that silence can be a powerful part of communication. Use it to slow down decision-making and deepen understanding.

7. Adapt to Context

Teach players to adjust their listening depending on the situation, i.e., listening differently during a high-pressure match versus a relaxed team chat. Use role-play or scenario-based training to help them recognise when to listen for detail, emotion, or instruction.

8. Integrate Listening into Goal Setting

Make listening a personal development goal for players. Track progress through self-assessments, coach observations, or peer feedback. Celebrate improvements, i.e., 'You really listened to your teammate's idea and built on it, that's great leadership'.

9. Insuring we are Inclusive.

To develop listening in all young people, it's important to recognise that listening can look different for different individuals. For example, neurodivergent participants may benefit from having something to do whilst listening, like using a fidget toy, doodling, or moving gently, which can help them stay engaged and process what's being said. These strategies don't distract from listening; they support it. Coaches should create environments where such needs are understood and respected, reinforcing that listening is about connection, not conformity.

One simple model of listening to share with participants is Stop, Focus and Repeat:

- Stop anything that might be a distraction. That might include putting down stationery or tools, not writing or reading anything else, and ensuring that there are no distracting background noises. (it's recognised that for some this may be less useful, neurodivergent individuals often really need to fiddle with things to listen but there are things that are always a distraction such as technology, phones etc).
- Focus on the speaker by looking at them and being ready to receive the instructions. Your brain must be in a place of actively trying to remember what is being said. You cannot be thinking about other things.
- Repeat what you are hearing in your head several times so that you have been able to process it and check that you understand what it means in your head.

Once participants are focused on listening, the next step is to see if participants can recall simple instructions. This itself is an important [listening skill](#), as throughout a participants education they will be expected to listen and remember instructions regularly.

To help things to stick in our long-term memories we can encourage participants to:

- Think about whether the instructions follow patterns that they already know. For example, there might be links between how we clean different objects, how we write different things down, or how we play different games.
- Visualise themselves completing the task by following the instructions.
- Break the instructions into three separate packages and imagine them in order.

If there are more than three instructions it can be hard to remember them. We might need to put them into smaller subsets of instructions. It can be helpful to provide participants with strategies to help them check what they have understood. They can do this by repeating back or rephrasing what they heard. Another nice exercise is to ask participants to think through the key questioning words in relation to what they have heard:

- **Who** – who is involved, and how?
- **What** – what is happening?
- **Where** – where is this taking place?
- **When** – when is this happening; at what time and for how long?
- **How** – how is this going to happen; what are the steps that will be followed?

Once your participants can reflect on what they have already understood they can use the same question stems to come up with good questions that are *relevant* to the situation to learn more. Questions that are not relevant will waste time and suggest to the speaker that they have not been listening.

Active Listening Activities (Progressive Difficulty)

- **'Echo Back' Drill**

After explaining a task, ask participants to repeat instructions to a partner to check understanding.

- **'Coach's Corner'**
Pause the session and ask open questions like 'What did you notice?' or 'What could we try differently?' to encourage reflection.
- **Story Relay**
One player hears a short story or tactical explanation and must retell it with accuracy and detail to the group.
- **Tactical Relay**
One player receives a tactical instruction and passes it through a chain of teammates. The final player executes the instruction, testing memory and clarity.
- **Distraction Drill**
Deliver instructions while introducing distractions (i.e., background noise, movement). Players must filter and act only on relevant information.

Listening Cues & Signals (Progressive Difficulty)

- **'1, 2, Clap' Refocus Cue**
Use rhythmic claps or hand signals to regain attention during transitions or moments of distraction.
- **'Eyes on Me' Challenge**
Introduce a visual cue (i.e., raised hand) that signals silence and focus before giving instructions.
- **Signal Game**
Use coloured cards or gestures to indicate when to speak, listen, or pause—especially useful in noisy environments.
- **Multi-Signal Challenge**
Layer visual, verbal, and movement cues during a fast-paced drill. Players must respond only to the correct cue, reinforcing selective attention.
- **Reactive Listening Game**
Players respond to specific verbal cues embedded in a stream of unrelated instructions, sharpening focus and reaction time.

Feedback Through Listening (Progressive Difficulty)

- **Mini Huddle**
After a game or drill, ask players to share one thing they learned or felt, encouraging reflection and peer listening.
- **Silent Strategy**
Players plan a tactic in silence, then explain it, testing their listening and interpretation of non-verbal cues.
- **Emotion Mirror**
One player shares a feeling, and the other reflects it back using tone and body language to show understanding.
- **Peer Playback**
After a drill, one player explains what their partner did well and what could improve—based only on what they heard and observed.
- **Coach Shadowing**
A player shadows the coach and listens to how instructions are delivered. They then summarise key messages to the group, reinforcing listening for meaning and tone.

Resources for further Reading

- 1: Spence, G. (2020). *Fit to Listen? Coach Fitness and Readiness*. Philosophy of Coaching- <https://philosophyofcoaching.org/v5i1/04.pdf>
- 2: Pickford, J. (2023). *The Power of Deep Listening in Coaching*. Animas Coaching- <https://www.animascoaching.com/blog/the-power-of-deep-listening-in-coaching/>

Downloadable tools (Free)

- 'Active Listening Games for Kids' PDF – Playworks
<https://www.playworks.org>
(Look for 'listening games' – simple drills for PE or sports coaching)
- Positive Coaching Alliance: Communication Tips
<https://positivecoach.org/resource-zone/>
Guides on how to connect with young athletes effectively.

- Youth Sport Trust (UK)
<https://www.youthsporttrust.org>

Video Resources

3 Ways to be a Better Listener- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnUp7WgZ2TU>

Listening is about Understanding- <https://www.scouts.org.uk/news/2019/may/scouts-helps-young-people-develop-active-listening-skills/>

Can Active Listening boost team dynamics in Sport- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioDLUsnK5Kc>

Books (Optional for Deeper Learning)

- 'Coaching Children in Sport' – Ian Stafford
Clear advice on engaging children through purposeful communication.
- 'The Coach's Guide to Teaching' – Doug Lemov
Excellent sections on attention, instruction delivery, and listening in sports contexts.