

# You Can... Teach social listening skills

Social listening involves a number of social conventions, such as looking at the speaker, taking turns and **actively** listening to what the speaker has to say.

## Thinking points

- Many children today find eye contact difficult. In some cultures it is considered rude, so you will have to explain (to children and parents) that eye contact in school is both OK and necessary.
- A more frequent cause of poor eye contact is too much screen-based activity outside school. A recent British study found that a majority of six- to eight-year-olds were more interested in looking at a blank screen than a human face. Since facial expression is a key way of communicating emotion, this is a disturbing development.

## Tips, ideas and activities

- If children find it difficult to make eye contact, provide activities that help them look at you and each other. Similarly, provide directed activities to develop turn-taking. You can use daily social interactions in the classroom for this (such as the 'greeting' activity on page 14), or you can explicitly practise skills in PSHE. Chapter 4 on circle time provides many suggestions.
- Social conventions are relatively easy to teach because they relate to outward behaviour. But the skill of active listening – focusing on what the speaker is saying, and trying to understand it – goes on inside your head. Talk about this with your better listeners in small groups. Usually they can describe what good listening looks like ('the listener sits still, the listener asks questions if something isn't clear'). But can anyone describe what active listening *feels* like? This sort of discussion raises children's awareness (and yours!) of what listening involves.
- Young children listen naturally when they are motivated – if they want to know what someone is saying, they will listen. So when children's interest is fired by some event in or around the classroom, follow it up. Always take advantage of children's interest – you will achieve much more that way than by following a careful plan that sends everyone to sleep.
- We then have to help children transfer the natural motivation (from events and activities that naturally inspire their interest) to the day-to-day stuff of school learning, which sometimes is not fundamentally interesting to small children. This is a long and delicate task – it can't be rushed.
- The first and most important teaching strategy is to model good listening yourself, which is why Chapter 2 is devoted to this topic.

