Inner Explorer Beyond The Program for Teachers April 2015



# Listening



Dear Inner Explorer Teachers,

All of us at Inner Explorer would like to take this opportunity to thank you for what you do every day. We appreciate the challenge and importance of your work and applaud you for shaping the lives of young people. We hope that Inner Explorer has been a useful addition to your classroom routines for you and for

your students.

We ask children in school to listen and pay attention many times each day, yet we often do not teach them how. Researchers have discovered that most adults remember only 25% of what we hear! Listening is a rather underdeveloped human skill; many of us talk much more than we listen.

Taking this into consideration, this month we invite you to experiment with your own listening. Perhaps you can make time to go outside to a park or a place where there are trees and simply sit and listen. This time of year, birds' songs are plentiful. Might you be able to distinguish the sounds of different birds? Depending on where you are, you might listen for the sound of snow melting, or hear plants, branches or leaves rustling in a gentle breeze. Frogs are croaking, crickets are chirping and rain may be pattering. The sounds of spring, if we take time to listen, are often lovely.

We invite you to think about your favorite relationships and why they are your favorites. It may be that the relationships that mean the most to you are the ones in which you feel most heard; the ones in which your friends or family really listen to you; they hear you and accept you for who you are. When reading about listening, one learns that often we are our own biggest impediment to communication. We may insert our own perspective into a conversation when it is not requested. If someone is telling us about a vacation, we may chime in about our own. How often are we wanting to say something and while eager to speak, not really listening to what is being said? Does your mind wander when others are talking? These questions are not meant to make us feel badly, only to recognize how difficult it is for us to listen. If this is true for us, how difficult must it be for our students to listen?

Sometimes we may feel agitated because of others' noise; a neighbor's dog, a crying baby on a plane, a student's constant complaining. What if instead of judging a disagreeable sound, we simply hear those sounds with mindful awareness? For example, rather than attaching judgment to an unpleasant sound, simply label the sound: dog barking, baby crying. Many a student of mindful awareness has found peace in doing so. You may too!

We hope you have fun exploring sound, hearing and listening this month!

## **Activities for Inside the Classroom and Outside the Classroom**

1. Ring a bell, have students listen to it with their eyes open. Then, have students listen to it with their eyes closed. Then ask them with their eyes closed to listen to the bell and when they are unable to hear it anymore to raise their hands. Finally, ask them to listen to ambient sounds for thirty seconds and then to describe what they hear.

- 2. Pair up students in twos. Tell them they will be talking to each other to answer a question. Questions should be personal: for example, What is the nicest thing someone has ever said to you? OR If you could go anywhere, where would you go? OR What is your favorite food? Give students a minute before they begin answering the question and tell them you are doing so in order for each to figure out what he or she is going to say rather than figuring it out when the other person is speaking. Let them know they will be sharing their classmate's answer with others. Break the class into groups of six (three sets of partners). Have partner pairs describe the answers they heard from each other to the whole group.
- 3. Take the class outside with their journals. Have students listen to ambient sounds for two minutes. Encourage them to do this with their eyes closed. Ask them to journal about what they heard.
- 4. Distractions are everywhere. Mindful awareness helps us focus on what we choose to focus on. Ask students what sounds distract or annoy them. Host a discussion about working with annoying sounds, pesky siblings, people arguing, a classmate tapping a pencil to be annoying. Explain that labeling a distracting noise may transform the noise into a sound. Assign homework for students to address the issue of pesky noises. Have them write about their experiences describing how they did so. Hold a classroom conversation about this topic. Students will learn much from each others' discoveries.
- 5. Before beginning a lesson, tell students to turn on their reading brains, their multiplication table brains, their geometry brains or their science brains (whatever lesson you are going to teach). Put your hand up near the side of your head and turn your wrist as if you are turning a key. Ask them to do the same in order to turn on their "subject" brain. Give a 15 minute lesson. After the lesson, ask students about the quality of their listening and learning. If a student has a hard time with math and he/she approaches the lesson with doubt and fear, the learning will be more difficult than If he/she approaches it by directing the brain to pay attention without fear.
- 6. How often do your students raise their hands before they even hear the completed question being asked? How many of your students raise their hands waiting to share while others are talking? Ask the students if they recognize that personality trait in themselves. Encourage all students to wait to raise their hands until your question is complete. Also encourage them to put their hands down and to listen to what others are saying before raising their hands again.

- 7. Assign homework for students to ask an adult in their household a personal question, the answer of which would be lengthy. Ask them not to take notes, but to turn on their listening brains. During the following class, have students share what they learned from the adults. Brainstorming four or five questions with students so that the questions are interesting to them may help the assignment be more successful.
- 8. Have a classroom discussion about listening and students' listening habits. See what awareness might arise from such a conversation. Give a writing assignment asking students what they learned about their own listening from the discussion.

## **Brain Science of Listening**

We have 80 billion neurons in our heads, more neurons in our brain than there are stars in our galaxy! It is estimated that there may be as many as a trillion synapses, places where neurons connect in our brains. Is it any surprise that with all of this neural activity, listening and paying attention is a difficult task? A center of the brain that controls our attention and detects when our minds go off track is the anterior cingular cortex. It sits in the middle of both sides of our brain, between the prefrontal cortex and the emotional limbic system. Stress actually severs the connection between our prefrontal cortex (executive function/decision making part of the brain) and our hippocampus (memory center) in the brain, making it difficult, if not impossible to listen and keep in our brain what we have heard.

Add our predisposition to want to be important and to insert ourselves in conversations, our sensitivity to being hurt by what others say, our fear of not understanding or insecurity of self and it's a miracle that we can pay attention at all! That said, because of neuroplasticity, we can train our brains to listen more effectively and to do so without judging. It is important to be aware of how we listen now before we can improve our listening habits. Perhaps devoting time this month to being in the moment, will enable us and our students to improve our listening skills.

### WE WANT TO HEAR & SHARE YOUR STORIES!!!

One of the most rewarding aspects of being involved with a mindful awareness program is listening to the heart-warming stories of how the program affects students and teachers. Some of the most important learning occurs from hearing others' stories. On that note, we'd like to feature your stories and photos in

our Beyond the Program monthly newsletter! Please send your stories and photos to Tabitha at <a href="mailto:totoole@innerexplorer.org">totoole@innerexplorer.org</a>.

(If you send a photo, we will need a completed consent form. Click here to print the photo release form.)

#### Our contact information is:

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