

How do you help children listen, not just wait for a chance to speak? – The Following Game

"Our children are very good at speaking. They have opinions about everything, and they are happy to put them forward. But they're terrible at listening to each other"

To be a good listener, you have to become a follower. You have to stop moving in your own direction for a while and follow the thoughts of the person speaking as close as you can. And like any skill, a good way to practice listening/following is to play a game.

How to play The Following Game

It's best if the players stand in a circle, but any format where people can see one another is OK. I start as the "leader", making slow gestures which the "followers" copy as I move.

I start with symmetrical gestures, spreading and raising my hands, and bringing them together. Then I move one up and the other down, and back again. The effect you're after is slow-mo martial arts/Tai Chi, with all your followers able to keep up.

Name a new leader

I explain as I move that I'm about to say someone's name, and that when I do, we swap and he becomes the leader. He carries on moving smoothly and everyone watches and follows what he does. After a few movements, he names somebody else as the new leader and joins in following him... and so on

Who's following whom?

The final stage is for a series of different players to take on the job of leader without anyone calling names. It's very challenging with a large group and may be beyond younger children.

But it feels like magic when it works. The new leader just emerges without names being called, because everyone is watching everyone else and a new movement catches on and spreads. Afterwards, people should be asking "who was leading that bit?"

For this stage to work, players need to be willing to lead, but not desperate to. And above all, they have to be prepared to follow.

Followers have to be patient

In this game, everyone has to spend far longer following rather than leading, just as in a discussion everyone must spend far longer listening than speaking.

Listeners make a discussion

Just as the followers make the game. Making following others fun and a team activity helps children to see listening as an active "doing" of its own. If you can work the Karate-style theme and finish with a bow, you'll double the benefits!