

# Putting Research to Work for Families



**Focus:**  
Civilian

## The Relative Effectiveness of Active Listening in Initial Interactions

Weger, H., Bell, G.C., Minei, E., & Robinson, M.C. (2014). The relative effectiveness of active listening in initial interactions. *The International Journal of Listening*, 28(1), 13-31. doi:10.1080/10904018.2013.813234

**SUMMARY:** Active listening is an important communication skill, which has implications in the quality of interactions among individuals. The study examined how different types of responses (e.g., active listening, simple acknowledgement, and giving advice) can affect individual perception of listeners' attentiveness, comprehension, and sociability. Results indicated that active listening was associated with high conversational satisfaction, perceived understanding, and perception of social attractiveness of the listener.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Participants who received active listening tended to feel more understood and had higher satisfaction with their conversation than participants who received simple acknowledgement and advice.
- Participants who received active listening or advice rated the listener as more socially attractive in comparison to the participants who received simple acknowledgement.
- There was no difference in the conversational satisfaction reported by participants who received active listening and those who received advice.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS:

- Collaborate with other professionals in the field (e.g., mental health services providers) about ways to facilitate program activities that provide opportunities for healthier interaction among children and youth
- Attend trainings to enhance positive communication skills such as addressing issues directly and taking another person's perspective

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAM LEADERS:

- Incorporate active listening activities and role-playing into curriculum
- Educate children and families about the different types of listening and communication styles that foster healthy communication and supportive relationships

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS:

- Encourage development and support for research programs that promote healthy relationships in children, youth, and families through effective communication
- Continue to support programs that provide recreational activities to children, youth, and families

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## METHODS

- Data were collected from undergraduate students in three experimental conditions. In the active listening condition, listeners paraphrased the participant’s message and, when appropriate, asked for further elaboration. In the simple acknowledgement condition, listeners mainly provided back-channel cues (e.g., head nods). In the advice condition, listeners gave advice to the participant (e.g., suggesting activities to engage in).
- Participants' satisfaction with the listener was assessed using the Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction Inventory, social attractiveness of listener was assessed by McCroskey and Richmond's social attractiveness scale, and the belief about how much the listener understood the participant was assessed by the Feelings of Understanding/Misunderstanding Scale.
- Multiple comparisons were done to investigate if active listening, simple acknowledgement, and giving advice produced different interaction rewards (e.g., perceived social attractiveness of listener).

## PARTICIPANTS

- The sample consisted of 115 undergraduate students, of which 70.9% of students were female.
- The age range of participants was from 18 to 50 years. The average age was 20.01 years (SD = 4.37).
- Participants identified as 67% White, 18% Latino, 5.2% Asian-American, 3.5% Black, 2.6% Caribbean, and 3.5% chose "other" or "prefer not to say."

## LIMITATIONS

- The study did not explore listener's nonverbal communication as a variable (such as body posture, gestures, and etc.) and the effects it had on the participants perception of an active listener, which limits the understanding of the interactions.
- Participants were enrolled in the introductory communication course, and may differ from the general population in ways that may affect the results and were not examined in the study.
- Participants and listeners only had one interaction and it is unclear if perception of the listeners' social attractiveness, perceived understanding, and attentiveness would be consistent across multiple interactions.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Explore how different nonverbal communications (such as gestures and posture) combined with active listening can affect the perception of speakers' comprehensiveness and social attractiveness
- Examine how differences in personal characteristics of listener (e.g., age or gender) affect the quality of interaction
- Examine how multiple interactions with the listener affects rated sociability, comprehension, and attentiveness over time

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

**Design**



**Excellent**  
Research Plan  
and Sample

**Methods**



**Appropriate**  
Measurement  
and Analysis

**Limitations**



**Several**

For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:  
<https://reachfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>