

# The Soundscape of Early Childhood

by Carol Garboden Murray

**“Listening is an ethical and aesthetic attitude.”**

— Loris Malaguzzi

I first began thinking about sound when I was a young child. I am noise sensitive and did not like school. The cafeteria and hallways were painfully noisy places, but I loved my first-grade teacher’s voice. I recall watching her lips move and soaking in her warm voice without paying attention to a thing she was saying. It was the tone of her voice that anchored me and made me feel safe in a big public school. I still have a hard time being in crowded noisy places, so as a teacher of young children, I have learned to adapt—and with an awareness of sound, I have thought a great deal about how to create pleasant soundscapes for young children.

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*Young Children: A Guide for Infant, Toddler and Preschool Teachers* (Gryphon House) is being released this fall in a revised edition. For easy to follow instructions, photos, and ways to integrate sign language into your classroom, check out *Simple Signing* at [www.gryphonhouse.com](http://www.gryphonhouse.com)

Julian Treasure is the author of *Sound Business*. In his TED Talk he describes the four ways sound affects us:

■ **Physiologically**—Sound impacts our breathing, heart rate, and our brain waves. Noise pollution can lead to high blood pressure and loud noises raise stress levels.

■ **Psychologically**—Sounds (especially music) can alter our mood. Natural sound, like bird song, is relaxing and reassuring. Loud jarring sounds can cause anger and depression.

■ **Cognitively**—Sounds can promote or interfere with our attention and thinking. Noise greatly reduces task performance at work and school.

■ **Behaviorally**—Sound can make people react in peaceful or hostile ways. Sounds can make us



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move quickly or slowly. Advertising offers good examples of how sounds influence behavior.

## Designing the Soundscape for Early Learning

As early childhood teachers we prepare the environment, but mostly we focus on what children see and touch. The auditory environment is invisible, but it is just as important. Spaces full of children are full of sound and there is much we can do to design a beautiful soundscape for young children.

The first step is to become a listener. It requires self-awareness and self-control to consciously listen more and talk less. As you become aware of the soundscape around you, ask yourself:

- Do you primarily hear the hum of children's voices or is the dominant sound that of the teacher giving directions?
- Can you evaluate the level of engagement and deep play by sound?
- Can you distinguish between an enlivened noisy classroom that is productive and one that is aimlessly noisy or chaotic?
- Is there a balance in the ebb and flow of sound? Are there quiet moments and even silent pauses built into the day?
- Which sounds bring you pleasure, joy, peace?
- Which sounds disturb you or cause stress?
- Are there certain children who move away from sound or seek sound?

## Listen to Yourself and Appreciate Your Voice

*"The voice is as much a part of us much as our physical appearance is... We each have a sound."*—Alice Parker

Teachers, like actors, are professional voice users. The teacher's voice is a material that contributes profoundly to the soundscape. Listen to yourself:

- What do you appreciate about your teaching voice?
- Does your teaching voice match your goals for the soundscape you want for children?
- What do you notice when you intentionally talk less?
- How do you decide when to talk?

- What other ways do you communicate when you are practicing less talk and more listening?

## Voice Volume

Hearing a calm, grounded voice is effective in getting students' attention. A whisper catches the ear. As teachers, we have the responsibility of being "in charge" and with this role, we often respond by speaking louder than we realize. When teachers speak loudly, the classroom volume escalates, and when the classroom volume escalates, the teacher speaks up even more. Become aware that you are a leader of voice volume. Silence breeds silence. Cultivate the art of consciously turning up and down the volume of your own voice throughout the day. Notice how children respond to your exclamations, whispers, and silent gestures.

## Voice Tone

Tone of voice often reveals what a speaker is feeling. I am thinking of Shelley, a teacher I admire, whose voice carries a tone of joy. When she says a child's name, it is implicit in her tone that she is happy to see them. Read these phrases below and imagine the tone that accompanies each description.

- I knew at once she was a leader because there was a tone of certainty in her voice.
- I could tell by the sharp tone of his voice he was quickly losing patience.
- There was a warm, friendly roundness to his words.

Tones are contagious. Auditory tones spread through schools and, in turn, the soundscape informs the culture and emotional climate. Children are intuitive and they perceive our respect and our authenticity through tone. Tone can also help us evaluate our view of children. Tones that are harsh may

reveal beliefs that children need to be reprimanded to learn. Tones that are always sing-songy or high-pitched may indicate that we do not take children seriously. Teachers who believe children are capable and whole are likely to use tones that are clear, curious, matter-of-fact, and respectful. We can ask ourselves:

- Is my tone authentic?
- Am I speaking in my true voice or a "teacher-y voice?"
- What underlying attitudes does my tone reveal about my view of children and my view of teaching?
- Does my tone reflect respect for the teaching profession and for the children?

## Create Auditory Zones

In early education we work in teams, which means there are at least two adults in the classroom (usually more). At team meetings, we can discuss the auditory zones. A teacher working with four children in the block corner can become aware of adjusting her voice

for that small group. Often teachers working in one zone are speaking loud enough for the whole class to hear. For example, the teacher's voice while reading a story in the library corner can be a distraction to the child painting at the art easel and it may also overlap with the teacher who is having a conversation with others in the block corner. Teams of teachers should be mindful to maintain auditory zones so that their teaching voices do not compete or overlap. Working in auditory zones can also help us become mindful of not calling across the room.

## Don't Let Directions Dominate

As an experiment, try sitting on the floor near the cubby area one day and imagine you are a three-year-old while the adults assist children finding their coats, boots, and mittens to go out and play on a winter day. Count how many times you hear the same directions repeated. *Get your coat ... Where's your coat? ... Put on your coat now ...* Notice that overlapping and repetitive verbiage is not effective—it is just auditory pollution.





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When children are stressed or overstimulated, they can turn off listening. Teachers get frustrated after we have repeated a command many times because it feels like no one is listening (and it is true—our voice has just been shut out and has become noise by the overwhelmed child). Repeating oneself creates a feeling of ineffectiveness, so let's not allow our days with children to be reduced to giving commands and directions. You can reserve your voice for connections and conversations. Respect your voice and others will respect it.

### Adopt Total Communication

With total communication, we consider the many ways we communicate—gestures, facial expressions, body language, whispers, sign language, and visual cues. With the intention to use total communication you can be in tune to the needs of those around you, and overall a more effective communicator.

If you have already given the verbal direction “get your coat on” (remember, do not repeat yourself,) give the direction a second time in a new way, such as simply pointing to the coat, whispering and moving close to a child, or using sign language. Continue using key nonverbal cues throughout transitions and busy times of the day. In doing this you are using most-to-least prompting to help a child move towards independence, all the while promoting a pleasant soundscape.

We can also teach young children sign language as a special silent code and use a few key signs regularly. Sign language always involves facial expressions—and so it helps children develop emotional intelligence as they learn to use and read facial expressions as a part of language. Signs and gestures can reduce noise levels and support a diverse and dynamic soundscape.

- At snacks and meals, use American Sign Language for words like please, thank you, more, and all done.
- For giving praise, use thumbs up or smile or wink or use ASL for good job, thank you, and nice idea.
- At transitions, use ASL for clean up, get your coat, and wash hands.

Team meetings about volume and tone can be sensitive because we do not want to offend our colleagues by telling them to be quiet and to talk less; however, if we take pedagogy seriously, we can discuss these practices as part of the art and science of teaching. Beautiful picture books, natural lighting, and organized art supplies are materials for the physical environment and similarly—teaching voices, volumes, and tones are materials for the soundscape that promote learning, engagement, and wellness for our children and ourselves.

## Share Songs and Oral Traditions

*“Song is a special type of speech. Lullabies, songs, and rhymes of every culture carry the signature melodies and inflections of a mother tongue, preparing a child’s ear and brain for language listening.”*

—Sally Goddard Blythe

Music influences the way we feel. Songs and poems bring melody and rhythm into our days. We can promote a pleasant auditory environment by using songs or chants through transitions that may otherwise feel auditorally chaotic. When telling stories, we can become intentional about fluctuating volume, whispering for dramatic effect, pausing and giving silent spaces for thinking, and making more room for the voices of children. I believe music and story from the natural human voice is best. Voice is a way we become known to one another. There is a time and place for recorded sound, but if we value the human relationships at the heart of our work, we can choose natural singing voices, conversation, and storytelling over recorded sounds. It is also important to consider that background noise such as recorded music or fans or buzzing lights will intrude on attention and engagement for children with auditory sensitivities. Neuro-imaging has shown that children’s response to live music is different from recorded music and babies and young children are particularly responsive to the natural voice of parents and caregivers.

## Practice Silence

*“Silence can be found, and silence can find you. Silence can be lost and recovered. But silence cannot be imagined, although most people think so. To experience the soul-swelling wonder of silence, you must hear it.”* — Gordon Hempton, *One Square Inch of Silence: One Man’s Quest to Preserve Quiet* (2010)

Cultivating the art of listening offers us the opportunity to ask ourselves how comfortable we are with silence and how we can allow quiet pauses in the soundscape. Current research suggests that a daily dose of silence is imperative to developing original thought and creative ideas. Recent studies indicate that silence can grow the brain and promotes thinking. A 2013 study published in the journal *Brain, Structure and Function* found that periods of daily silence led to the development of new cells in the hippocampus (a region of the brain associated with learning, memory, and emotion).

One winter in my school, the teachers noticed how quiet the children became while watching birds at the bird feeder. We created a ritual of “making silence.” The children found it exciting to get as close as they could to the birds at the window while practicing being still. Sometimes after we have gathered for a song or story, we use a singing bowl or chime to practice silence together. The children learn to sit quietly and listen to the chime, which is at first a loud and crisp ring that disappears gradually into the silence. I have also practiced making silence with children in these ways:

- Have circle time outside and encourage children to listen to the natural environment. Decide on a symbol for children to let you know when they hear a sound (such as raise your pinky in the air when you hear a bird sing). Sit together quietly and listen.
- Practice moving like silent animals (butterflies or turtles).
- Tell a story that the children act out and embed a moment of silence within the story. (Such as the children are pretending to be babies sleeping—emphasize the quietness of the night; or, the children are pretending to be caterpillars getting

ready for metamorphosis—emphasize the quietness inside the chrysalis).

Creating silence can be a natural and pleasant experience for children. By being intentional designers of the soundscape in our early childhood communities, we can offer rare places that are set apart from the sound cluttered world.

## Resources

Hempton, G., (2010). One Square Inch of Silence: One Man’s Quest to preserve Quiet Julian Treasure, Master of Sound. <http://www.juliantreasure.com>

The Four Ways Sound Affects Us [https://www.ted.com/talks/julian\\_treasure\\_the\\_4\\_ways\\_sound\\_affects\\_us](https://www.ted.com/talks/julian_treasure_the_4_ways_sound_affects_us)

Alice Parker—Interview by Krista Trippett: Singing is the Most Compassionable of Arts <https://www.onbeing.org/programs/alice-parker-singing-companionable-arts/>

Sally Goodard Blythe <http://sallygoddardblythe.co.uk/publications/>

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