Full Body Listening vs. Active Listening

Two different pictures of what “paying attention” looks like — and why judging engagement by posture alone leaves neurodivergent students behind.

Full body listening

The traditional classroom model: sit on the mat or at the desk, arms and legs still, mouth closed, body facing forward, eyes on the teacher.

It’s built around a neurotypical assumption — that stillness equals listening, and that visible calm reflects internal focus. For many students, that assumption holds up fine.

For neurodivergent students, it often doesn’t. Holding a “listening body” can take real, active effort — effort that gets pulled away from actually processing what’s being said. The more energy goes into looking like you’re listening, the less is left to actually listen.

Active listening

What it looks like in the moment: fidgeting, rocking in a chair, playing with hair, doodling, humming, or moving around the room.

Traditionally, this reads as rude, distracted, or disengaged. But for many neurodivergent students, small repetitive movement is exactly how they regulate their body enough to focus — not a sign they’ve checked out.

The behavior that looks the least like “listening” is often doing the most work to make listening possible.

The real test

Posture is a poor proxy for comprehension. If you ask a fidgeting, rocking, or humming student to recite or paraphrase what you just said, they can often repeat it back — sometimes word for word — even though they never looked “still” for a second.

Side-by-Side & Ways to Support It

	Full Body Listening	Active Listening
Looks like	Still body, hands quiet, eyes on speaker	eyes on speaker Fidgeting, rocking, moving, humming
Built for	Neurotypical regulation styles	Neurodivergent regulation styles
Common assumption	Stillness = listening	Movement = not listening
What's actually happening	Visible calm, but not always internal focus	always internal focus Self-regulation that frees up attention to focus
Best way to check	Can't rely on posture alone	Ask them to recite or paraphrase what was said

Ways to support Active Listening in the room

- **Separate compliance from comprehension.** Check understanding with a quick recap or paraphrase, not with "eyes up here."
- **Allow quiet fidgeting.** A fidget tool, doodling, or a wobble cushion can be the thing that makes focus possible — not a distraction to shut down.
- **Don't force eye contact.** Some students focus better while looking away — it's a regulation strategy, not disrespect.
- **Offer movement-friendly seating.** Standing, rocking chairs, or floor space can support the same self-regulation "active listening" describes.
- **Reframe it for other adults.** A quick heads-up — "this is how they listen" — prevents a fidgeting student from being misread as defiant.
- **Watch for the exceptions.** Movement that's escalating, unsafe, or clearly disruptive to others still needs a response — the goal is telling regulation apart from dysregulation, not ignoring every behavior.