

Sound sensitivity in children

Introduction

Many young children express dislike and anxiety to certain sounds, especially if these are loud or unexpected. This may range from a simple 'startle' response to an unknown sound, to more severe and fearful reactions.

Throughout childhood it is normal for children to have a phase of increased reactions to new sounds. This is usually a short-term phase but can sometimes be referred to as hyperacusis if these difficulties become long term.

Common sounds to find uncomfortable

Like adults, children will often find loud or sudden sounds distressing. This can include sounds such as hair dryers, fire alarms, vacuum cleaners, lawn mowers or DIY tools. Continued loud noise, such as concerts and bands, may also be overwhelming for young children.

What can help?

There are many ways to support your child to reduce the impact sound sensitivity has on them.

For most children their sensitivity to certain sounds will naturally settle down as they grow and learn to see that there is nothing to fear when they do hear those sounds. Often, some simple reassurance that they are not in danger can be enough to settle them.

If your child's difficulties do not go away or it affects their day-to-day life, we can look at ways to support them in reducing their sensitivity.

Helping your child

The following suggestions may help to support your child if they are experiencing difficulties:

- Comfort them.
- Explain where the sound came from.
- Gently expose them to the noise causing them concern. Repeated gentle exposure to the noise can help to reduce the anxiety and desensitise them to the sound.
- Introduce sounds gradually - try recording the sounds they don't like, playing them back at a very low volume or have the sound in a different room.
- Give them control over the noise as this will often reduce their fear. You can do this by allowing them to make noises, for instance; clapping hands or making a drum set from pots and pans.
- If your child avoids a place or situation due to sounds they heard before, firstly introduce this place again without the upsetting sound. Gradually, over a period of days or weeks you will be able to bring back the sound so that it becomes more natural and less worrying.
- Allow them to move to a place where they feel more comfortable.
- Speak to their school and agree to a consistent approach. Older children may be reassured if they have the teacher's permission to leave the room or hall for a few minutes when struggling with noises.

Use of hearing protection

Children need to develop normal reactions to sounds so it is important that they are exposed to everyday sounds such as traffic noise or busy shops.

The use of ear plugs, ear muffs or ear defenders should be avoided except in short-term situations such as fireworks displays or loud concerts.

Glue Ear

Glue ear is a very common cause of temporary hearing loss in children and is caused by a build-up of fluid in the middle ear and can last for some time. This temporary hearing loss can last for some time. When the fluid drains and hearing goes back to normal the world can sound a much noisier place. This can often lead to some sound sensitivity which settles with time once they are used to the sounds again.

Other support services

Your child's school or Health Visitor may be able to arrange additional support or assessments if their sound sensitivity continues to cause significant emotional or behavioural problems.

Further information

Sound Sensitivity In Children:
<https://www.entandaudiologynews.com/features/audiology-features/post/sound-sensitivity-in-children>

Hyperacusis information:
<https://www.tinnitus.org.uk/hyperacusis>

Contact details

If your child continues to struggle, contact your GP or the Hearing Services department using the details below.

Postal address:
Paediatric Hearing Services
Gloucestershire Royal Hospital
Great Western Road
Gloucester
GL1 3NN

Phone:
0300 422 8210

Email:
ghn-tr.paediatric-hearing.svcs@nhs.net

