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Helping a Child who is Sensitive to Loud Sounds

Sensitivity to loud sounds is a common problem for many children

Many young children find loud, sudden sounds uncomfortable or upsetting. While children are developing they are more likely to display their dislike of sounds physically, by covering their ears or crying. They may describe the sound as painful rather than uncomfortable. The most commonly reported sounds that children dislike are unexpected noises outside their control.

It is not uncommon for a child with additional sensory issues or complex needs to experience sound sensitivity. Occupational Therapy, your paediatrician or Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) may be able to provide more specific support.

Common sounds that children dislike

- Vacuum cleaners
- Hand dryers
- Sirens
- Bells
- Fireworks
- Roadworks/traffic noise
- Crowded/noisy rooms

- Most children find that their sensitivity to sound gets better over time.
- To help with this, it is important that parents, carers and teachers are consistent in the way that they respond to the child's sensitivity to distressing sounds.
- Parents are urged to keep track of which specific sounds irritate their child the most and share the list with any caregivers.
- Whenever possible provide a warning just before predictable noises (e.g. fire drills, school bells or before switching on the food processor).
- Avoid silence.
- We do not recommend the use of ear plugs or ear defenders except in extreme circumstances or short term. Exposure to normal tolerable sounds is important for the ear and brain to develop normal sensitivity.
- Children with glue ear may be more sensitive to sounds when the glue ear clears. It takes time to adapt to hearing all the noises again.

Children's Community Audiology

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Suggestions to help your child

1. Reassurance

If the noise sensitivity is not significantly affecting family life or school progress, you may simply be able to reassure your child that the sound is not harmful or threatening.

Although, it is important to recognise that your child finds some sounds uncomfortable, it may not be helpful to focus on it.

2. Taking control

Try to explain the source of the sound to your child. Their reaction to the sound may be reduced if they can control it.

If your child is upset by the sound of the vacuum cleaner, encourage them to switch it on and off.

If your child is upset by the sounds of hands clapping, encourage them to clap when playing games at home.

Humour is a great way of removing the fear from an object. If your child is scared of the hairdryer or the washing machine, you could dress it up with big glasses and stick some funny ears on it and give it a silly voice. It's very hard to be scared of something that you are giggling at!

3. Relaxation and breathing

Breathing techniques can help to relieve anxiety and give your child something else to focus on rather than the sound that is upsetting.

There are many apps you can download to your smartphone or tablet. One very easy way is to use your child's hand and encourage them to breathe in and out as they trace their way up and down their finger-tips. There are lots of suggestions for relaxation techniques for children available online.

4. Behavioural desensitisation

This method can be used when your child's response to distressing sounds is causing them to avoid important occasions.

Behavioural desensitisation can help break down the association between the noise and fear.

It can be done by the family, without the need for professional support. It involves your child repeatedly listening to the distressing sound under controlled conditions,

You could record the sound onto your mobile phone or look for it on the computer, then play the sound at a low volume.

Over the next few days or weeks, gradually increase the volume until you are playing the sound at a level that usually causes distress. By that time, your child should be used to the sound and not get upset by it.

There is no medical treatment needed for sound sensitivity. Typically, as children grow and mature, so does their tolerance for loud noise.

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