

Sound sensitivity

Community paediatric audiology -
information for parents, carers and
teachers



If you have any
questions or would
like to discuss your results
further, please contact us on:
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What is sound sensitivity?

Sound sensitivity may also be known as hyperacusis. Some children may be sensitive to sounds and find them upsetting or uncomfortable or painful to hear. Each child may have different sound sensitivities and different reactions to them to other children.

What causes sound sensitivity?

Reactions to sounds are often behavioural and can be a normal phase for children to go through especially when younger. Sound sensitivity can trigger a fight or flight response. When a sound is loud, sudden or scary it can be natural to react to it, but often as adults we are able to understand what the sound is, where it comes from, is likely temporary and isn't dangerous. A child will likely need support to have this level of awareness and overcome these factors.

Sound sensitivities may be associated with children with other medical conditions, additional sensory issues or complex needs.

Also, if your child has recently had glue ear (middle ear fluid), this potentially may have caused a temporary hearing loss. When the glue ear clears and hearing returns to normal, these normal sound levels may be perceived as louder as the child is not used to them. The child will likely adjust gradually.

Types of sounds

The types of sounds children can find sensitive may vary, but generally the sounds are likely to be loud and unpredictable

Common sound sensitivities:

Sirens Vacuum cleaners Hand/hair dryers
Balloons popping Fireworks

This is not an exhaustive list and it can vary for each child.

How to help?

Mostly, sound sensitivities improve over time as the child gets older and there is no medical treatment for it. It is important that if support is put in place this is consistent with parents, carers and teachers.

Reassure and relax

When your child hears a loud sound, you can help them by offering reassurance and explaining what the sound is, where it is coming from. This can help to reassure them that the sound is not dangerous. Although reassurance for the recognition of sound sensitivity is important it is advised not to focus too much on it.

Desensitisation

You may want to use videos of the sounds that the child finds sensitive and play it at a low volume, gradually you could increase the sound in small steps over a period of time to help get used to the sound without causing distress. Also by allowing your child to take control and allowing them to make the noise may reduce their reaction.

If your child's sound sensitivity continues, it can be helpful to relax by engaging their focus on something else. For example, play 'I spy' near a busy playground or add funny faces to the vacuum cleaner. When a child is having fun, they are often more relaxed and their focus is not on the sound sensitivity that is making them anxious.

Useful tips

The use of ear protection, ear plugs or defenders are not recommended when a child displays sensitivities to sound, except for situations in loud noises such as fireworks and concerts.

Ear defenders or ear plugs can deprive the wearer from exposure to everyday sounds. It is important that the child is able to have natural exposure to different everyday sounds to develop appropriate reactions.

If these are already in use as a coping strategy it is recommended to reduce their use gradually, whilst using some tips mentioned to help minimise any of the anxieties.

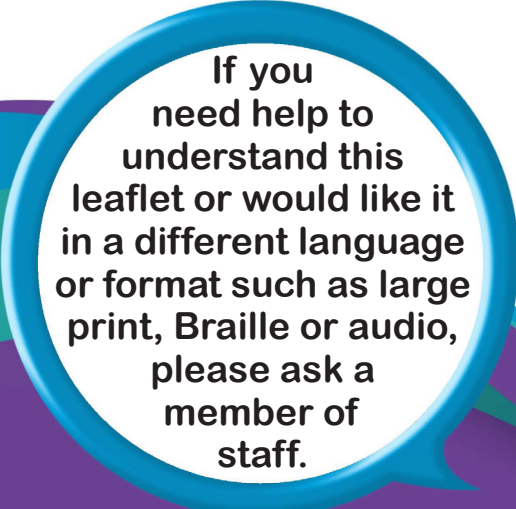
Additional support

It may be beneficial to also discuss these concerns with the health visitor, GP or school nurse if concerns persist. If your child has additional medical needs then their paediatrician may also be able to offer support.

References

Sound Sensitivity in Children <https://www.entandaudiologynews.com/features/audiology-features/post/sound-sensitivity-in-children> (accessed December 2022)

British Tinnitus Association - Hyperacusis <https://tinnitus.org.uk/understanding-tinnitus/what-is-tinnitus/types-of-tinnitus/hyperacusis/> (accessed December 2022)



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