

## PATIENT INFORMATION

# Sound sensitivity in children

### What is sensitivity to sound?

- The world is a loud place for little ears, and it is not uncommon for children to be sensitive to sounds.
- It can affect people of all ages, including adults, but it is most common in young children under the age of six.
- While it's true that noise sensitivity is common in children with certain medical conditions, the average child may also shy away from or become uncomfortable when confronted with loud noises.
- Babies may cry or fuss and toddlers may cover their ears with their hands or bury their faces into an adult's lap to avoid the sound.
- Interestingly, children with sound sensitivity have normal and not super-normal hearing.



### Types of common sounds children find distressing:

- Just like adults, children can find certain sounds uncomfortable. For example, loud, irregular sounds such as hand dryers, fire alarms, vacuum cleaners, lawn maintenance equipment, or even the flush of a public toilet can send a child running for cover.
- Prolonged loud noises such as at a concert or even the volume at a typical movie may also be too much for the child to enjoy.

### Glue ear and sound sensitivity:

- We often find children who have had glue ear are susceptible to sensitivity to sound once the glue ear has cleared.
- They often have reduced hearing for a period of time, which then clears and the world seems a louder place.
- This takes time to get used to loud noises again.

## **Signs and symptoms:**

- The noises are often very distressing to the children, who will typically put their hands over their ears and cry, or try to avoid the sounds, for example by leaving the room or turning off the television or radio.
- Some children become particularly distressed in crowded, noisy classrooms or in other settings where there is a lot of activity and noise and have a reluctance to participate in noisy or loud activities.
- Affected children may have difficulty hearing speech in noisy, or poor listening conditions.
- When an unwelcome sound occurs children with sensitivity to sound may show signs of anger, distress or panic. The link with their behaviour may not be obvious.
- Children with sound sensitivity may be inexplicably and unreasonably nervous of particular activities or rooms (where they have experienced distressing sounds before)
- In severe cases, children may refuse to attend school at all.
- Rarely, a child may be diagnosed with an extreme hypersensitivity to sound. This condition, referred to as hyperacusis involves sensitivity to common sounds that can seem unusually loud, intrusive, and sometimes painful.

## **How can I help?**

- 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.
- If the child becomes distressed by the exposure to sound, comfort and reassure however it is advised to not over emphasise the situation as this could make things worse.
- 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, even if your child finds a particular sound distressing. This is because it can make a child even more sensitive to louder sounds in the long term.
- Instead, you may wish to consider using one or more of the following methods listed below:

### **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.

i.e. if your child is upset by the sound of the vacuum cleaner, encourage his/her to switch it on and off,

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

### **3. 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,

i.e. you could record the sound onto your mobile phone or computer, and 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.

#### **Further help:**

If the sound sensitivity is associated with a wide range of sounds, and is causing significant behavioural and emotional difficulties, you may need some further help. If this is the case, we suggest you ask your GP to refer your child to a paediatrician.

#### **Acknowledgements:**

This leaflet has been based on information provided by Deafness Research UK and Hampshire Hospitals

#### **Additional information:**

If you have any questions you can contact us by phone or email.

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For further assistance or to receive this information in a different format, please contact the department which created this leaflet.