

Sound sensitivity in children

Information for parents and carers

What is sound sensitivity?

Definitions and terms:

Sound sensitivities can cause different levels of distress and discomfort when a child is exposed to certain sounds. It can be normal to dislike some sounds, however, when a child is always distressed and always has discomfort when they hear a certain sound, this makes it a problem. A child who dislikes a sound may well tell you they don't like it; a child with a problem coping with sound sensitivity will always be distressed and in discomfort when they are exposed to this sound.

Common sounds children react towards include: vacuum cleaners, hair dryers, hand dryers, and the school bell. Some children have very few sounds that they find distressing and others may have a long list of sounds. This is because every child is different.

Many children with sound sensitivity place their hands over, or their fingers in, their ears. You may also see your child trying to avoid the sound or becoming very anxious even before the sound is heard. Sometimes this can be seen in your child's behaviour, for example, maybe they don't want to go to a particular place because of the sounds.

Interestingly, the sounds your child reacts to may be everyday noises that you find surprising, as it doesn't appear to be a problem for other people. Also it is not unusual for a child to enjoy some loud sounds, yet have real difficulty with other sounds. Sound sensitivity is not an overall sensitivity of every sound, but more a reaction towards certain sounds.

Does my child have sound sensitivity?

If you recognise the following behaviours in your child, they may well have sound sensitivity:

- Becomes upset in response to a particular sound (cries, trembles, startles)
- Protects their ears in response to a particular sound
- Exhibits anxiety either before or during their exposure to a particular sound
- Avoids the sound source if possible.

How can I help my child?

The very good news is that when given appropriate help, we would expect a child with sound sensitivity to get better. Sound sensitivity does not need to be a problem forever.

The two ways to help are **Behavioural Management** and **Recalibration**. Both of these are quite easy to use in everyday life. We advise that you use both Behavioural Management and Recalibration to give your child the very best chances to improve.

It might be useful for you to note down the sounds that you know your child is sensitive towards; we have provided space below for you to do this. (You can re-visit this list at the end of the program. This is a great way to judge how well your child has done after six months of following the program).

Sounds my child is sensitive towards:

Example: hand-dryer, vacuum cleaner...

Behavioural Management is a way that you can help with the distress, anxiety and avoidance your child has towards sounds. We suggest using the following six steps. These can be changed to suit your child.

6 step Behavioural Management structure:

1. Provide comfort and reassurance to your child when they are upset with sounds.

Your child will need reassurance that they are safe and that the sound they are reacting towards will not harm them.

2. Explain the sound source to your child, making it clear why it makes its specific sound

It's not likely that your child will be able to reason when they are upset. Perhaps some time later in the day when they are feeling settled you could explain the sound to them; this helps them understand the sound so that over time it becomes normal.

3. Find ways to let your child have some control over the sounds. This could be by making the sound themselves or by finding ways to make the sound less scary, perhaps using play

Children learn through play. Making the sound they find really scary suddenly fun can help them overcome their fear. Be imaginative and seek to have some fun so that your child can build up some tolerance towards the sound.

4. Gently repeating your child's exposure to the sound may help them become more used to it

We would never advise totally avoiding a sound, because this would not allow your child the chance to have normal sensitivity of sound. It is important to let you know that **ear defenders, plugs or muffs should not be used except in extreme or short-term situations that can't be avoided (such as a loud concert)**. Letting your child hear normal sounds is really important if your child is to have normal reactions towards sounds.

5. Children will become more upset if they are forced to stay where they are upset. It is important to let them leave and go somewhere safe

Gently repeating exposure to sounds is great but we must provide a "way out" to help your child feel more in control. When they feel in control they should feel less anxious. Building on short positive experiences of sounds will help them in the long term.

6. It could be helpful if your child has permission to go to a 'quiet' area or even leave the classroom for a while if they are upset with sounds at school

This tends not to be a misused privilege. When your child is distressed they will need a place of safety to relax.

Here are some fun suggestions on how to implement Behavioural Management with your child:



Hand dryer:

Use imaginative play in your home bathroom, for example, a cardboard box over a towel rail to act as hand dryer; use hair dryer on hands; play games; watch YouTube videos to allow your child to know what to expect from each particular hand dryer, i.e. high or low pitched.

Vacuum cleaner:

Let your child use a timer/stop clock; always give prior warning; messy play/get your child to help with vacuuming games.



Hair dryer:

Use games with the hair dryer on cool setting with paper/tissues; use a timer; use reward charts; give prior warning if using close by.

Dogs barking:

Use stories to reduce anxiety surrounding dogs; visit 'calm dogs' if possible.



Sirens:

Use a picture or small police car to take everywhere for your child to focus on; have lots of stories/conversations about sirens.

Parties/balloons/soft play:

Sit at the edge of the room to allow your child to take breaks; use a great deal of encouragement; play music in the home/have a 'mini-party' frequently to allow your child to become familiar with and know what to expect at a party; use YouTube for exposure to balloon modelling, etc; give prior warning if balloons will be present.



Raised voices:

Give encouragement and reassurance; explain to your child the various reasons for other children being louder, e.g. excitable, distressed. If this is in relation to an adult raising their voice, explain the circumstances of this to the child, e.g. the teacher trying to get the attention of the whole class.

Panto/theatre:

Try to arrange a pre-visit tour of the theatre; use 'panto style' communication in order to familiarise your child with various sayings.





Babies crying:

Use stories about babies' various needs/reasons to cry; try using a doll/teddy to help soothe your child; have a quiet corner with a distracting/calming activity, e.g. Lego or colouring in, for the child to retreat to if necessary.

Motorbikes/loud cars/air brakes on buses:

Use stories to help your child understand the noises of different vehicles; try using pictures or a small motorbike that is taken everywhere to provide a focus; if possible, give prior warning; if possible, allow your child to see a stationary motorbike up close and learn (where appropriate). Use a toy vehicle to mimic actions/sounds.



Construction/drilling/machinery:

Where possible, prepare your child for any work being undertaken; use YouTube videos to show your child various jobs that may be happening; use stories and discuss what might be happening; use toys to recreate the situation at home.

School environment (bell, assembly, dinner hall, playground, noisy classroom):

Give encouragement and reassurance; tell social stories; allow your child to take short breaks if needed; have a 'quiet area' they can retreat to should the need arise; inform the school of your child's current difficulties surrounding sound and identify a key person they can raise their concerns with; prior warning of when the bell will ring may help prepare your child and prevent them from being surprised or startled by it to the same degree.



Recalibration

- ➔ Recalibration means using pleasant sounds to change the way your child hears sounds that are causing upset. Over time, recalibration turns down the volume control in your child's head towards those particular sounds, so that they hear the sounds and respond to them like the rest of us.
- ➔ We would ask you to make sure a continuous and nice sound is played to your child over long periods of time. The easiest way to do this is overnight when they are sleeping and we would ask you to make sure they hear the nice sounds from bedtime until morning. This helps your child's hearing to **recalibrate** its sensitivity towards sounds.
- ➔ The volume your child needs to listen to the sound is set to "comfortable listening level"; not so noisy that it disturbs the household, and not so quiet that your child is straining to hear it.
- ➔ For this treatment to work, your child would need to listen to the sound **every night** for at least six months.

The two ways to obtain sound for recalibration are:

Option 1: App downloaded to your phone or tablet

There are a variety of “environmental sounds” apps suitable which can be downloaded free onto a device. We know of the following two because they are made by companies that we work with in the Audiology services.



Resound Relief - www.resound.com/en-US/hearing-aids/apps/relief-app

This app offers a library of sound therapy files and lets you create your own sounds from environmental sounds and small pieces of music.



Starkey Relax – www.starkey.com/blog/2015/05/Relax-Tinnitus-App-New

This app allows you to customise 12 relief sounds by changing the sounds’ volume and pitch, providing your own personalised sound.

Note: You may be concerned about using technology overnight in your child’s room. Some people have found using a Bluetooth Speaker inside their child’s room helpful (with the paired device outside of the room). Another helpful suggestion was using a keypad lock on the device so that your child cannot ‘play’ with it when they are expected to be sleeping.

Option 2: Using a night-time sound enrichment device

These tend to be relaxation devices for many different conditions such as stress, problems sleeping and a condition called Tinnitus. The sounds that these devices make are very helpful in helping sensitivities towards sounds. Devices can be purchased online.

Some examples of the type of product available can be viewed using the links below:

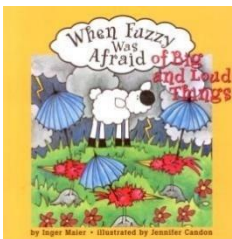
www.connevans.co.uk/product/1447936/14WELLC/Wellcare-Naturecare-Tinnitus-Sound-Relaxer

www.connevans.co.uk/catalogue/27074666/Tinnitus-sound-relaxers

www.connevans.co.uk/catalogue/27074667/Pillow-speakers-for-Sleep-or-Tinnitus-therapy

Note: if your child has a strong dislike of any of the suggested sounds, use of a fan in the room or a sensory light (if you have one at home), which make a continuous background noise can be used as alternative sound sources.

Other resources



When Fuzzy Was Afraid of Big Loud Things by Inger Maier

This book is available from various online sources.

So far

- We have received a sound sensitivity referral from a professional who has seen your child recently.
- We have sent you this booklet that explains what sound sensitivity is and how to help.
- We are asking you to follow the behaviour management and recalibration advice in this booklet for six months.

“The very good news is that when given appropriate help, we would expect a child with sound sensitivity to improve. Sound sensitivity does not need to continue forever.”

What next...

We will contact you by letter after six months to ask how you think your child has improved.

Interpretation and translation

This leaflet may be made available in a larger print, Braille or your community language.

Further information

Contact telephone number: **0131 312 1407**

