



Sound Sensitivity in Children

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The world is a loud place for little ears and sensitivity to loud sounds is a common problem for many children under the age of six.

Evidence suggests that up to 15% of children find loud sounds uncomfortable or upsetting.

Loudness discomfort is also common in, but much less of a problem, for adults because they have the ability to rationalise sounds and have developed ways to cope.

What is sensitivity to sound

The auditory system needs to mature before we are able to ignore or accept unwanted or unexpected sounds.

Whilst children are developing these skills they are more likely to display their dislike of sounds physically. 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 a sound.

Children are limited by their language and may describe a sound as painful rather than uncomfortable.

Interestingly, children with sound sensitivity have normal and not supernormal hearing.

Signs and symptoms

Crying or putting their hands over their ears

Trying to avoid the sounds by leaving the room or turning off the television

Reluctance to participate in noisy activities e.g., children's parties

When an unwelcome sound occurs they may show signs of anger, distress or panic

They may be inexplicably and unreasonably nervous of particular activities or rooms

Types of common sounds children find distressing

The most commonly reported sounds that children dislike tend to be unexpected noises and those that are outside the child's control.

- Hand dryers
- Vacuum cleaners
- Lawnmowers
- Sirens
- Bells
- Fireworks
- Roadworks
- Children's parties
- Indoor activities e.g. swimming and soft play
- Prolonged loud noises such as a concert or a typical movie may also be too much for a child to enjoy.

What causes it?

Usually your child's reaction is a result of their anxiety about a particular sound. It may have frightened them the first time they heard it and now they associate the noise with fear. Children can develop negative thoughts about their experiences of loud sounds and as a result make them more difficult to listen to.

Glue ear and sound sensitivity

Children who had glue ear might be sensitive to sound once the glue ear has cleared.

They often have reduced hearing for a period of time, which then clears and everything sounds louder. It takes time to get used to louder sounds again.

What you can do to help

If at all possible warn your child when a sound is likely to occur

If they do become distressed by a sound move them away if possible and then comfort and reassure them. Once your child is settled, try to explain what made the sound and why. Be gentle and try to explain what is

happening in a way they will understand. Understanding will help reduce the anxiety.

Try to distract them by focusing on something they like e.g. pulling funny faces or showing them something else in the environment that has a positive association.

Often their anxiety can be reduced by letting them take control of it e.g. switching vacuum cleaner on/off. Or play clapping games at home. Repeated gentle exposure to the sound will help your child reduce their anxiety and desensitise them to the specific sound. You can record the sound and listen to the sound at a low volume and gradually, over a period of days or weeks, increase the volume. Help break the cycle between sound and fear by listening to the sound during enjoyable play.

Some situations like loud parties may just be overwhelming to a child. It may be best to avoid these situations until your child is older.

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

What not to do

Don't make a big fuss over their reaction. This might encourage their behaviour as a way of gaining your attention.

Don't punish them. The calmer you are the calmer they will be.

Don't force your child to be exposed to these sounds.

Don't think they are being awkward. They are likely to be truly frightened.

The use of ear defenders or ear plugs should be avoided except in extreme circumstances or in the short term.

Contact Chime

If you have any further concerns, please contact us on:

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