Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh Teaching Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

# What is Sound Sensitivity?

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## Patient Information

## Community Children’s Audiology Services

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## Introduction

This information leaflet explains what sound sensitivity is and more importantly, what you can do to help your child. It aims to help you gain an understanding of sound sensitivity which your child may be experiencing. The world is a loud place for children, and it is quite common for children to be sensitive to some types of loud sounds.

# What is Sound Sensitivity?

Some children find certain loud sounds to be uncomfortable, painful or even upsetting, however your child may be able to tolerate loud sounds that they make themselves such as: banging a drum, musical toys or making loud vocal sounds. Sound sensitivity can be a normal behavioural phase that children experience. Most children don't understand why there is a loud sound or where it is coming from which can be unsettling for them. If your child learns to understand what the sound is, why it happens and where it comes from, this may help them to overcome sound sensitivity.

Some common examples of loud sounds that children may dislike are:

- Hand/hair dryers
- Vacuum cleaners
- Fireworks

- Sirens
- Popping of balloons
- Other children laughing, crying or shouting

## Common Behavioural Traits

Children with sound sensitivity may show their discomfort to these sounds by covering their ears, screaming, or crying. Some children may even try to escape the loud sound by leaving the room or environment. Certain sounds or noisy environments may cause some distress, worries or anxiety. A child may refuse to be within the environment that is causing them distress. Some examples of this are school assemblies, outdoor based activities and children's parties.

## Types of Sound Sensitivity

Sometimes, a child may develop a fear of loud sounds, this is known as **phonophobia**. Some of these sounds can include traffic, concerts and emergency response vehicles like fire engines, ambulances and police cars.

A child may also develop an extreme dislike of certain sounds, resulting in an emotional response, this is known as **misophonia.** Some of these sounds may include chewing noises, crunching, sniffing and tapping.

## Glue Ear and Sound Sensitivity

It is common for a child with glue ear to have fluctuations in their hearing. If your child experiences episodes of reduced hearing, they may seem to be more sensitive to sounds

once their hearing improves again as the world may seem to be a louder place. This is because their brain is adapting to the improvement in hearing. It may take some time for this sensitivity to settle down.

## What is Hyperacusis?

In some **rare** cases, a child may experience hypersensitivity to sounds, the medical term for this is hyperacusis. This usually results in an extreme dislike of certain sounds that are unbearable and/or causes physical pain.

## What Should You Avoid?

If a child is showing signs of sound sensitivity, avoid giving them headphones, earplugs or ear defenders. The use of these may cause your child to get used to the reduced volume, making it more difficult for them to adjust to the normal level of sound that is around them. Ear defenders may cause them to become more sensitive to sounds in the long term.

## How Can You Help?

With the right approach, you can help your child manage their sound sensitivity. Remember, if the sound is not too loud for you, it will not cause damage to your child's ears.

Here are some useful tips:

- Reassure your child when they hear a loud sound. Explain what the sound is, where it is coming from and why it is happening. This will help them to understand. If you know a loud sound is coming, prepare your child beforehand.

- Giving your child some control over the sound may improve their reaction. For example, helping with the hoovering, turning the hair dryer or hand dryer on themselves, or recording the sound and letting the child be in control of the volume or the on/off switch. Although it is important to recognise that your child finds some sounds uncomfortable, it is not always helpful to focus on this. Making the sounds fun can also help.

- Keep a record of the sounds that cause your child distress. Note down how long your child was upset for and what helped to soothe them.

- Repeated low level exposure to the problem noise whilst your child is playing may reduce their anxiety and help them get used to the sound. Exposure to this noise can even be done by playing it in the background.

- It may help to involve your child with the noisy situation. For example, involve them in the school assembly instead of just watching it. This often focuses their attention elsewhere and not on the noisy environment.

- Allow your child to move further away from a noisy situation until they feel comfortable.

If your child is going to an event such as a party or large gathering, they may feel discouraged from attending due to the possibility of loud noises. It may help if your child is given an incentive or a reason for attending. Allowing the child to come out of the event/party for breaks, if needed, may also help.

## How Can Others Help?

Find out which of the suggestions are the most helpful for your child. Share this information with everyone who cares for your child; this may include nursery, school, or wider family and friends. It will be useful for others to be informed.



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