

Occupational Therapy Service for Children and Young People

Sensitivity to Noise – Advice/Tips

Children/young people with sensory processing differences may react negatively to loud unexpected noises or other auditory stimuli because they become overwhelmed with this type of input.

When children are oversensitive to sound, it may result in fear, anxiety and at times avoidance of activities that most other children enjoy participating in.

A child, who has auditory defensiveness, when faced with the sound might typically cover their ears and show signs of distress e.g. crying, hitting out at others or running away.

Typically distressing sounds include the noise made by power tools, hair or hand dryers, vacuum cleaners, lawn mowers, thunder and fireworks.

Whilst some individuals are sensitive only to loud sudden noises, such as fire drills, others can be sensitive to noises that others easily screen out, such as the background noises of machines (e.g. fans, fluorescent lights, computers, ticking clocks etc.) or certain pitch/volume of voices.

The following activity ideas/suggestions may help keep the child/young person's nervous system in a calm state:

- Try and ensure your child is receiving sensory input, which is calming and organising, at regular points throughout their day. Calming and organising sensations include deep pressure tactile/proprioceptive inputs. Encourage physical activities such as pulling, pushing, and moving against resistance.
- Try to give advance warning: If there are loud sounds that you know are coming, let the child know what to expect ahead of time e.g. remind them about the self-flushing toilets and hand dryers in a public restrooms.
- Try to adapt their environment or the situation, if possible.
- Reassure the child that the noise isn't going to hurt them. Explain and discuss the source of the noise, to increase the child's understanding.
- Try to reduce sound levels by using ear defenders, noise cancelling headphones or ear buds (for older children). These can provide some protection from any noises that can't be avoided. It may take some experimentation to see which works best. Make sure the ear protection just reduces the sound level, as blocking it out altogether can be a safety issue.
- Younger children might be fine just holding their hands over their ears, if they are motivated enough to stay in a "noisy" event.
- Providing firm downward pressure through the shoulders can help calm the child.

- Remove the child from the noisy area until the sound goes away or find a quieter corner that is away from the noise e.g. in a noisy restaurant try and find a quiet corner away from the kitchen or in a noisy classroom you might suggest having a very quiet corner for the child to retreat to when noise becomes overwhelming.
- Address safety issues: When a child's sensitivity makes it hard for them to filter out unimportant sounds, they also might not be as able to tune into important ones. Those might include safety warnings like sirens or alarms. The child might try to get away from those noises quickly without noticing what's happening around him.
Encourage them to pay attention to what they're seeing/hearing i.e. the alarm bell or children lining up at the door. They should tell an adult first if they need to get away. Practice how to respond in these situations.
- Check out new places ahead of time, without your child, so you can explain to them what to expect.
- Take new experiences slowly: It is not always possible to avoid noisy places. It might help to introduce the child to new places slowly/gradually.
- Find out if there are quieter times available e.g. if you are going to larger stores/shopping centres/cinema etc.
- Share awareness about your child's sensitivity with teachers, family members, neighbours, etc. When a child knows that adults around him/her understand their "hidden" needs, the child feels safer and is likely to feel less anxious.
- Help the child to set boundaries: The sounds of some video/computer games or of play activities can be a trigger for some children. Teach the child it's ok to set boundaries with friends. You can help them to plan what to say e.g. "I like that game, but some of the sounds hurt my ears. Can we play a quieter/different one?"
- Use white noise: For some children, white noise in the background helps to soften the impact of jarring or annoying sounds. A fan or a white noise machine in the child's room may help with sleep.
- Listening to music through headphones can help drown out environmental noise and it may help your child to stay better focused on an activity.
- When possible allow the child to control of the volume settings on equipment.
- When out in public, let the child listen to music/sounds using head phones/player.
- Consider having the child chew something to help calm them e.g. a chewlery item, crunchy snack.

Strategies for School / Classroom:

- Allow the child to sit near the front of classroom.
- Seat the child away from classmates who tend to be chatty and noisy.
- Prepare the child before entering a noisy environment using a visual schedule.
- Use a visual cue to control the noise in the classroom e.g. a volume control icon or a traffic light system.
- Use a visual timer to show the child how long he/she is to stay at a certain activity/environment.
- Allow the child to transition between lessons earlier than peers to help avoid possible sensory overload.
- Provide the child with a visual scale (5-point scale or similar) to indicate when they are becoming distressed and need a calm, quiet area.
- Provide 1:1 support for focused pieces of work.
- Give the child extra time between instructions and also more time before you repeat instructions to avoid auditory overload.
- Allow the child to move to a quiet area when doing more focused pieces of work.
- Work in small groups, sectioning off areas of the room.
- Be aware of low level background noises e.g. ticking clocks and remove the source of the noise, where possible.
- Fidget toys, stress balls and squeezable objects/toys can help as calming tools if there is noise in the environment.
- Allow the child to have access to ear defenders/noise cancelling headphones/ear buds when they feel they are struggling with noise levels e.g. during assemblies, during break or at mealtimes. Having them available provides the child with security and reassurance but they should not be worn constantly.
- Have a quiet space that the child can go to if they feel the need to remove themselves from a situation. A clear access and usage policy will be needed for this area. Provide a visual prompt/help card so the child can request to leave the room when feeling overwhelmed by noise(s).
- Teach the child calming strategies to use when there is an unexpected noise e.g. breathing exercises or self-regulating deep pressure activities.