

Patient information

Sound sensitivity

What causes it?

Sound sensitivity can be a normal phase that children go through. A lot of young children find loud, sudden sounds scary, particularly if they don't fully understand why the sound has occurred. Most children will adapt as they learn to understand what the noise is, where it comes from and that it isn't dangerous.

It is not uncommon for a child with additional sensory issues or complex needs to experience sound sensitivity. Occupational Therapy, your paediatrician or Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) may be able to provide more specific support.

What can I do to help?

Reassurance: Reassure your child when they come across a sound that they find upsetting. Explaining to them what the sound is, where it comes from and why it is loud can help them to understand. If you know the sound is coming, prepare your child by telling them about it in advance.

Remove the fear factor: Humour is a great way of removing the fear from an object. If your child is scared of the hairdryer or the washing machine, you could dress it up with big glasses and stick some funny ears on it and give it a silly voice, for instance. It's very hard to be scared of something that you are giggling at!

Relaxation and breathing: Breathing techniques can help to relieve anxiety and give your child something else to focus on rather than the sound that is upsetting. There are many apps you can download to your smartphone or tablet. One very easy way is to use your child's hand and encourage them to breathe in and out as they trace their way up and down their fingers-tips. There are lots of suggestions for relaxation techniques for children available online.

Desensitisation: It can be tempting to remove your child from a distressing situation or to use ear defenders to help them. Unfortunately, this is likely to make them more sensitive to the particular sound they are avoiding as, when they do come across it, they will find it all the more distressing for not having had a chance to get used to it. Allowing your child the opportunity to get used to the sound they dislike in a safe, controlled way, can help them to become less sensitive to it. You can use videos on the internet to show your child a video clip of the sound they find upsetting, with the volume turned down, or even off completely. Prepare the child for the start of the clip, get them to press the “play” button, and allow them to alter the volume - this can give them a sense of control. Then gradually increase the volume as they become less sensitive to it. This can take time, for instance try five minutes one week at a certain level then again, a few days later at a louder level.

Traffic light system: For older children, it can help to explain to your child that the reason they find some sounds upsetting is that their brain is being too clever! You can use a traffic light system to show that their brain has switched on to high alert “red” and is flagging up too many sounds as scary. By flagging up so many sounds as scary, their brain is getting ready to deal with what it thinks is something to be worried about. We want their brain to go back to low alert “green” and let more sounds through as not scary. Encouraging your child to remember this each time they encounter an upsetting sound can help get their brain back to “green”.

Acknowledgements

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