

Patient advice and liaison service (PALS)

If you have a compliment, complaint or concern please contact our PALS team on 020 7288 5551 or whh-tr.whitthealthPALS@nhs.net

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Sound Sensitivity

Practical ways to help your child



What is Sound Sensitivity?

Some children experience sensitivity to sound, and may even find certain sounds uncomfortable or upsetting. This is sometimes called hyperacusis and can vary from child to child. Frequently the sensitivity appears suddenly due to loud sounds such as sirens, vacuum cleaners, motorbikes, fireworks, balloons popping, hand and hairdryers. It may also appear in noisy environments such as parties, cinemas or swimming pools. For some children, specific types of sounds (which may not seem loud to others) can be problematic. It is not uncommon for a child with additional sensory issues or complex needs to experience sound sensitivity. Occupational therapy, child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) or a paediatrician may be able to provide more specific support.

What can I do to help?

Reassure

Reassure your child when they come across a sound that they find upsetting. Explain to them what the nature and source of the sound is, and why it is loud, this may help them to understand. If you know the sound is coming, you can prepare the child by telling them in advance.

Relaxation and breathing

Breathing techniques can help to relieve anxiety and give your child something else to focus on, rather than on the sound that is upsetting them. One easy way to practise breathing is to use your child's hand and encourage them to breathe in and out as they trace their way up and down their fingertips. There are lots of suggestions for breathing and relaxation techniques online, as well as many downloadable apps.

Desensitisation

It may feel natural to automatically remove your child from a situation which is causing them distress or even to use ear defenders to help reduce the sound, however, this is likely to make them more sensitive to the particular sound they are avoiding, and more distressing when they do come across it. Allowing your child the opportunity to get used to the sound they dislike in a safe and controlled way can help them to become less sensitive to it. You can use videos online to show your child the sound they find upsetting with the volume turned down or turned off completely. Prepare your child for the start of the clip, get them to press the 'play' button, and allow them to adjust the **volume**, giving them a sense of control. You can then gradually increase the volume as they become less sensitive to it. This can take time and requires patience but you can try five minutes one week at a certain level then again a few days later at a louder level.

Using a traffic light system

For older children, it can help to explain to them the reason that they find some sounds upsetting is because their brain is getting ready to deal with what it thinks is something to worry about. You can use the traffic light system to show that their brain has switched to high alert (red) and is flagging up too many sounds as frightening. We want to encourage their brain to go back to low alert (green) and let more sounds through as not scary. Reminding the child of this each time they encounter a distressing sound can help them to get back to green.

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