

Auditory Sensitivity

The auditory system refers to our ability to take in different sounds, process it, and produce an appropriate response. When a child over-reacts to sounds or seems easily distracted by noise that many of us can tune out, she or he is demonstrating auditory sensitivity.

Common behavioural signs that indicate a child has auditory sensitivity include:

- Covers ears a lot.
- Easily distracted and has difficulties filtering out background noises i.e. fan, wind, traffic, humming of lights, ticking of clock.
- Negative reactions to everyday sound i.e. hand dryer.
- Negative reactions to unexpected and/or loud noises i.e. fire alarm, fireworks, baby crying.
- Easily overwhelmed by busy, noisy or echoing environments i.e. assembly, swimming pool, playgrounds, supermarkets.
- May create own noise to block out external noise.
- May ask people to be quiet frequently.
- Often associated with fight/flight response, emotional outbursts and aggressive behaviours.
- The child may engage in repetitive behaviours to stay calm e.g. rocking, chewing.

Strategies to try:

- Seat child away from auditory distractions such as fans, heaters, windows, doors, etc.
- Seat child away from classmates who tend to be chatty and noisy.
- Allow child to move to a quiet area when doing focused work or when he/she need to time out away from the noise. A quiet/calm area may be an empty room in school or a quiet classroom.
- Where possible, reduce the noise level and background noises. For example, the teacher should encourage appropriate speaker-listener manners for all children in class – one person talks at a time; others listen quietly.
- Use a visual cue to control the noise in the classroom e.g. a volume control icon or a traffic light system. Alternatively, teach the child to use a visual cue i.e. traffic light card to indicate when the noise level is starting to get too much and they need a quiet break.
- For group work discussions, allow the child's group to work in a quiet area away from the noise of the rest of the class. They could work in a quiet room, resource area or even in the corridor if safe and appropriate.
- Where possible, forewarn the child or prepare the child for any loud or unexpected noises or busy environments.
- Use a visual timer to show the child how long she or he has to stay in a noisy room.

- Add 'quiet time' to the child's timetable. Knowing that you will be getting quiet time throughout the day, can help the child cope with a noisy environment for longer.
- Label the noise, where it coming from and if possible tell the child when the noise will stop. If you hear a noise and are not sure where it is coming from or what it is, it can be very disorienting. Encourage the child to count to see how long it takes before the noise stops.
- Chewing or sucking i.e. sugar free gum, hard boiled mints, etc. can help block out sounds that the child finds uncomfortable at school, at home and when he or she is out and about in the community.
- Where possible, give the child some control over the noise level i.e. he/she can shut the door or window, turn the volume down on the TV/music, move to a quiet room, etc.
- Consider changing the way transitions are managed by breaking it down so that the teacher selects one table at a time to go and move to another location rather than the whole class all do it at the same time. This will help reduce all the auditory distractions and support the child to transition more calmly. Alternatively, allow the child to transition before or after his/her peers have transitioned.
- Allow the child to listen to music or an audiobook with earphones or headphones to block out the noise that the child finds uncomfortable.
- Please be mindful that the child's perception of the noise level will be different to his or her peers and teachers. What we may consider as not being noisy may be perceived differently by the child. Adults should watch out for signs that he/she may be bothered by noises and support him/her to use any of the above strategies.
- As a last resort when all of the above strategies have not worked, the child may benefit from access to a pair of ear defenders or noise cancelling headphones. He or she should only be encouraged to wear these for the shortest amount of time needed or at least until the noise that is bothering him/her has stopped. Continuous use of wearing ear defenders can increase sensitivity to noises over time.

Contact details

Children's Therapy Services

Telephone number: 0300 019 2936

For further general health-related information, please ask the relevant department for an information prescription or contact:

The Health Information Centre
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 Longfleet Road
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 BH15 2JB
 Telephone: 0300 019 8003

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We can supply this information in other formats, in larger print or have it translated for you. Please call the Patient Experience Team on 0300 019 8499 or email patientexperienceteam@uhd.nhs.uk for advice.

If you wish to make any comments or to ask about any research evidence used to write this leaflet, please contact the Patient Experience Team on 0300 019 8499, write to the Patient Experience Team (address above) or email patientexperienceteam@uhd.nhs.uk

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