



Behavioural desensitisation and auditory desensitisation

It is not uncommon for children to react negatively to sudden or new sounds. This leaflet outlines some useful suggestions to help desensitise them to the noises that are inducing concern.

Anxiety caused by noise exposure and desensitisation

In order to break down your child's association of anxiety with noise exposure, a desensitisation programme may be necessary. A programme of behavioural desensitisation may be developed in an individual management plan but the following simple suggestions can be used by everyone and is a very good starting point.

Simple techniques to try:

1. When the child becomes distressed by exposure to sound, move them away from the sound (if possible) and comfort them in a calm and detached way.
2. Try to explain the source of the sound to the child.
3. The child's fearful reaction to the sound will often diminish if they can exercise some control over the noise. Encourage the child to clap their own hands, to play with toys that make a noise and to stop/start the vacuum cleaner at home.
4. Repeated gentle introduction to the noise may help to reduce the child's anxiety response and desensitise them to the sound. Record a number of the uncomfortable sounds and play them back set at a very low volume or allow them to choose the level. Gradually, over a period of days or weeks, increase the volume. Practice with the sounds while the child is playing, in a way that the child can control. By exposing the child to sounds in controlled conditions, the association of noise with fear can be gradually broken.
5. Children should not be forced to stay in a situation that is obviously causing them distress. This may compound their apprehension and make them associate a situation with pain. If fear of a specific situation has become established, it is important to gradually desensitise the child, with time and care.
6. Older children may be reassured if they are told they have the teacher's permission to leave the classroom for a few minutes at any point (if they are exposed to a noise that distresses them).
7. The use of ear plugs, muffs or defenders should be avoided, except in short-term, unavoidable situations. Experience to normal and tolerable sound is crucial if the ear and brain are to establish normal sensitivity, i.e. get used to them.

8. Use a sound enrichment device e.g. Sound Oasis. This has different sounds such as sea waves, gentle rain, running water, woodland noises etc. This can be played in the background – just audible, when they are doing quiet activities such as reading, listening to story, doing homework, and winding down before going to bed and during the night if help to get child off to sleep.

Proprioceptive activities

The proprioceptive system is one of the lesser known senses and has huge influence on our body awareness. The proprioceptive system has role to play within the over-responsive auditory system – it helps us to modulate and calm our arousal level so that we can attend and focus.

Our proprioceptive system has receptors located within our muscles and joints. These receptors or sensors are triggered when they are squashed or pulled apart during movement. Many of the activities suggested below stimulate this sensation as it is so useful to the body and brain.

If we are moving and using effort, we are compressing or triggering these receptors.

Encouraging the use of proprioceptive activities can be a useful step to address the child's sensitivity to noises that trigger anxiety. Examples of activities include: helping with jobs around the house, pre-school, carrying objects, pushing heavy doors, pre-school, gardening, pushing wheelie toys, swimming, trampolining, playground equipment, running, cycling on a trike or bike, kneading dough or modelling with clay and tug of war. Other activities and methods include:

- Create a 'fidget-box' (a box of objects, such as squeeze toys) and allow the child to choose an object when they are finding it hard to concentrate or calm down. Make sure the child is able to use the object safely and appropriately.
- Soft, calm music played into earphones may aid concentration and calm a child. Try using classical music. Make sure the music is not played too loudly through the earphones.
- Allow the child to carry out activities in a quiet environment at intervals throughout the day.
- Allow the child to fidget with something and use the proprioceptive ideas above.
- White noise and/or therapeutic natural sounds such as waves, gentle rain, and calming music can be downloaded and can also be useful when played quietly through earphones.
- Over the ear headphones (without additional noise cancellation and not close fitting) or a tighter fitting hat (when out of doors) can provide relief from noise.
- Make sure there are rewards for help given. Remember the activities mentioned above can be very tiring, so the secret is to make it motivating for the child to participate little and often.

If you have any further questions, please contact:

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