



Hearing Loss in Children

Many of us associate hearing loss with old age, but a recent report from the League for the Hard of Hearing states that noise is a leading cause of hearing loss in the 28 million people with impaired hearing in the United States. And now our children are showing up in the noise-victim statistics.

The July 2001 issue of the journal *Pediatrics* provided disturbing statistics about loss of hearing in children. Findings based on a nationally representative 1988-94 survey of 5,249 participants suggest that an estimated 5.2 million American children have some degree of hearing loss. The research links the hearing damage with exposure to such noise sources as rock concerts, fireworks, and lawn mowers. But these may not be the most significant noise sources in your child's life.

As a teenager in the 60's I bought my first transistor radio, which came with a primitive twisted-wire single earplug. It was then I discovered the guilty pleasure of listening to music at whatever volume setting I chose, and at whatever time I chose, without having my parents yelling the inevitable, "Turn that thing down!" at me. But those tinny sounds I listened to under the bedcovers at night came nowhere close to the gut-shaking, bass-boosted music that can be produced on today's iPods and portable CD players. And nowadays, around the age of puberty, our children sprout headsets like newly-evolved appendages on their ears, habitually spending hours wired in to raucous, eardrum-popping sounds. Communication becomes difficult. But your child—even a teenager—may not just be ignoring you. He may be permanently damaging his hearing.

How loud is too loud?

Both the level of noise and the length of exposure affect the degree of hearing loss. Because it happens gradually, most people don't even notice that their hearing is affected until it's too late. Any noisy environment is "too loud" when:

- ⦿ You have to raise your voice to be heard above the noise.
- ⦿ You can't hear someone less than two feet away unless they're shouting.

How would I know if my child's hearing has been damaged?

Your children may have suffered some degree of hearing loss if they report:

- ⦿ That speech around them sounds muffled or dull.
- ⦿ That they have ringing in their ears after exposure to noise.

What precautions should I take?

The simplest way to protect your children's hearing is to limit their exposure to harmful noise, so far as you are able. Limit their "headset" time. Limit the music volume in their rooms. Set a good example by turning down your TV and car radio.

If you know your kids are going to be exposed to a noisy environment like a rock concert, be firm about the use of earplugs. Stress that the plugs do not cut out *all* sound; they will still be able to hear the music. (Most earplug packs state the level of reduction they provide.) And *always* take enough earplugs for your entire family when you go to the movie theater. With today's movies blaring out music, explosions and gun battles at over 90 dB, it's the smart thing to do.

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