

There's nothing
wrong with
youthful exuberance,
but there is such a
thing as too much noise,
says **Sue Cowley...**

Talk plays a crucial role in young children's learning and development. By learning how to speak and listen, children can express their ideas, explain their emotions and learn more about their world. Talk helps to build the skills needed for literacy, allowing children to acquire a wide and varied vocabulary. However, for high-quality talk to take place, children need to learn how to both speak and listen. If the noise levels in your setting become too high, this will interfere with the quality of the talk that takes place.

The scenario

The noise levels in your setting are gradually increasing, and the situation is getting out of control. Some children talk too loudly a lot of the time, shouting out on the carpet and responding loudly when a practitioner questions their behaviour. You have noticed a connection between noisy times of the day and aggressive behaviour. Some children talk very little, perhaps because they feel their voices will not be heard. Staff have complained that they often end the day with a headache.

The issue

A certain level of noise is desirable when working with young children. However, constant high levels of noise are stressful for both children and practitioners. For safety reasons, the children must be able to hear your voice, for instance, when you need to get their attention quickly. A number of factors can cause high levels of noise, for example, it is often more of an issue in open plan settings. All staff should be aware of strategies that will keep noise to a reasonable level, particularly strategies that help the children regulate their own behaviour.



about the author

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BEST BEHAVIOUR

Dealing with the behaviour

First, take time to identify why this behaviour issue is occurring, by conducting a detailed observation. Here are some questions to guide your thinking:

- 1 Do the high levels of noise occur at certain times of the day or all the time?
- 2 Are there particular areas within your setting where noise levels are higher? Is the noise level higher when children move from one kind of activity to another?
- 3 Is the noise level associated with particular activities - is it about how excited the children are?
- 4 Do some children make most of the noise, or are all the children being noisy? Do they seem to be aware of how much noise they are making?
- 5 Which interventions do staff currently use to control noise levels?
- 6 Do staff talk more loudly than is necessary, or do they model the noise levels they want the children to achieve?

Reinforce your rules around the appropriate levels of noise within your setting, perhaps during a carpet session. Think carefully about the messages you send through the rule you set. At our preschool we had a long discussion about how we should phrase our rule around noise. We wanted the children to understand that different noise levels are appropriate for different situations. The 'Golden Rule' we chose was, 'We use our indoor voices inside, and our outdoor voices outside'.

Talk with the children about why it is

important to speak and listen. Talk together about different levels of noise - how do they feel when it is noisy and when it is quiet? Have visual reminders of your rule throughout your setting, referring back to it regularly. Train staff in the strategies they can use to manage noise levels.

Finding solutions

You can use a wide range of strategies to help the children change overly noisy behaviour:

- Encourage practitioners to model the behaviour they wish to see. When adults talk quietly, this encourages the children to listen carefully.
- Consider how the activities that you set up impact on overall noise levels. Plan for a balance between exciting, noisy activities, and calmer, quieter ones.
- Have regular times when everyone listens silently, for instance, during story time. Praise children when they stay quiet, and when you see them managing their own noise levels.
- Encourage the children to be aware of the overall noise level. Get them to practise different levels of noise, first talking very loudly, and then talking very quietly.
- Give the children a good reason to keep noise levels down. For instance, you could take them outside to listen to birdsong, going outside quietly so they do not scare the birds away. An imaginative focus works well. For example, when moving from one activity to another, ask the children to imagine that there is a sleeping giant under the floor, and that they must not wake him.
- Have quiet times during each day, when everyone gets a break from noise.