

# Volume control

**Adele Devine** offers ways to help sound sensitive children survive and thrive in your setting...

**C**lose your eyes and try to tune in to every sound around you. Become aware of each little creak, electronic buzz or echo. What if someone turned the volume up and up on all those little sounds until it was unbearable? What if it got so loud that you had to cover your ears? Imagine it was your least favourite noise, for example, nails screeching down a black board. You cover your eyes, your ears, you may even rock to comfort yourself. No one else seems bothered. They are all acting normal. Can't they hear it? Why won't they stop it?

Okay - point made... Sound sensitive children do suffer genuine physical pain. When they cover their ears they are not being 'overly sensitive'; they are acting out of self-preservation and blocking out noise that hurts.

I recently spoke to Scott James (an adult with Asperger's Syndrome, who found fame through the *X Factor*). He said he would not get on a bus if there was a baby on board, because if it cried the sound would hurt. He compared the pain to being stabbed. Knowing that the baby could cry would stop him going on the bus. Of course, Scott can choose not to go on a bus, but what about a pre-verbal child? How might they communicate the fact that they do not want to step foot in your setting?

## How can you help?

When you're caring for a sound sensitive child, there are little things you can do that will help a lot:

- Suggest the child arrives before the crowds and transitions at quiet times.
- Have headphones available to muffle sounds.
- Have a listening station with MP3 players to block out sounds.



- Create a visual volume control to use when it gets too loud (see panel).
- Use a traffic light system for children's noise levels.
- Switch off hand driers and have towels as an alternative.
- Have a quiet area where one or two children can escape.
- Avoid maintenance work, drilling, etc. during their sessions.
- Agree and tell them you don't like it either. Can you compromise?
- Reward and praise them as they overcome hurdles.

## CASE STUDY

### 'Hand drier Harry' (Age 5, Diagnosis: Autism)

Each year, the children in my class visit a charity fun day. It was during one such occasion that Harry started to do that recognisable 'little boy dance', so I took him to the toilets. Harry was always good as gold about going to the toilet at school, so I did not anticipate a problem. However, when Harry got to the toilets, he looked in then turned to leave. I knew he needed to go, and I didn't want an accident - Harry was so reliable that we had not packed any spare pants or trousers.

"Harry, toilet," I said firmly as he pulled my hand to go.

"No toilet!" was his high-pitched reply. "No toilet!" This time he tried to pull me away.

The toilets were empty and quiet. I saw Harry eyeing the hand drier and knew he was frightened. "Harry, no one will use the hand drier." He was not convinced. "I will

## 'OUCH!'

### THE TOP 10 NOISY OFFENDERS...

- Hand or hair driers
- Toilets flushing
- Dogs barking
- Babies crying
- Vacuum cleaners
- Any alarm
- Fireworks
- People shouting
- Clocks ticking
- The hum of fluorescent lights



### about the author

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guard the hand drier." He was considering... "I will turn it off and guard it. No one will get past me."

Harry processed this and then went tentatively towards the toilet. He popped his head back out after going in to check I was doing my guard duty. I did my best, most serious guard impression. It was enough... I felt privileged that Harry trusted me. He knew that once I gave him my word I would have guarded that hand drier with my life.

### CASE STUDY

#### 'No show Nel' (Age 5, Diagnosis: PDA)

Nel had never made it to class. She would cuddle her knees in a corner by the school reception. She kept her hands over her ears and head down until home time and would have a violent protest if anyone tried to move her further, hitting out, scratching and attempting to bite. We had to get past this...

I'd noticed Nel wore an MP3 player for her journey to school. I looked at the issues and asked Nel's Mother if she could trial keeping the MP3 player. Nel's Mother reasoned, "No other children have MP3 players in school, and she would not be able to hear the lessons."

I explained that the other children were getting to class. The way things were she would never hear the lessons. We needed to compromise.

We decided to trial letting Nel keep her MP3 player. I waited until all the children had gone in from their taxis so it was quieter. Nel's Mum did not ask for the MP3 player. I took Nel a different route to class, avoiding the reception by going around the outside of the school building. Nel seemed pleasantly surprised to still have her MP3 player, and ended up in class. She caused a bit of havoc and refused to go out at

playtime, but she managed to get to class the 'Nel way' from then on.

At the start Nel had the MP3 player on at all times, drowning out unwanted noise, but we made steps forwards. As the term went on I noticed that although Nel was wearing the headphones the music was often switched off. Nel was coping with our day because she had her MP3 player there as a crutch. If it all got too much she could avoid class noise. Gradually, we built trust and reduced the need for headphones. By the end of the year Nel was able to keep the MP3 player in her bag and just use it at playtime, lunch and on transport.

Nel needed those headphones to get to class as another child might want to bring their teddy.

### Final thoughts

You might expect a sound sensitive child to be silent, but they often also cause the most noise. They might be very vocal, repeating sounds, echoing, flicking switches on and off or slamming doors. There is nothing straight forward about these children - they are a complex, often contradictory puzzle. But by observing, listening and building trust you may secure foundations for their future inclusion.



### VISUAL VOLUME CONTROLS

When you have a sound sensitive child, never ever shout to quieten a class. Teach the children to use a visual volume control,



such as that pictured, so that they can communicate how bad they find the noise too. You might say, "Oh dear! The volume is now on black. That is too loud!" then move the arrow down and say "I like it here." You can print out a visual volume control free from [senassist.com/resources.html](http://senassist.com/resources.html)