



# A Lifetime of Hearing

Making sure your child's ears are protected for life.

It is the accumulated exposure to loud sounds and noisy environments that can impact a child's hearing. "I typically recommend avoiding exposing infants and young children to potentially hazardous noises in the first place," states Naomi Smith, a public health audiologist with the Interior Health Authority, based in Kamloops, BC. "The overuse of earbuds to listen to Personal Music Players (PMPs) and exposure to high noise levels at rock concerts, or hockey games can also be of concern when it comes to noise exposure and older children."

Ms. Smith also stresses the importance of wearing proper hearing protection for every single exposure to a hazardous noise. The more noise a person is exposed to, the greater the risk of permanent hearing impairment."

## What kind of hearing loss are we talking about?

The Canadian Academy of Audiology ([www.canadianaudiology.ca](http://www.canadianaudiology.ca)) suggests that all sounds have the potential to lead to permanent hearing loss if they are not properly controlled. Research shows that exposure to sounds over 85 dB (about as loud as busy city traffic) for prolonged periods of time are at risk for hearing loss. However, not all sounds have the same impact and the intensity, or loudness, of the noise along with the amount of time your child is exposed will impact how their hearing is affected.

**Temporary Hearing Loss:** occurs gradually and hearing is restored after taking a break from the noise. Concert and movie-goers have most likely experienced this type of hearing loss.

**Permanent Hearing Loss:** temporary hearing loss can easily progress to a permanent hearing loss if there is repeated and prolonged exposure to hazardous sounds.

**Sudden Permanent Hearing Loss:** this type of hearing loss occurs after exposure to a brief, but very intense, sound such as a gunshot, or fireworks.

## How to Protect Your Child's Hearing

Now that you know a little more about the facts of NIHL, as a parent how can you ensure that your child's hearing is well protected?

- Become aware of sound in small spaces. Noisy toys and loud music become amplified in small indoor spaces. If you feel certain toys are too loud for your child to play with inside (some trucks and musical instruments would fit here) have your child play with them outside where the noise can be dispersed.
  - Avoid playing the car radio at a loud level. Ms. Smith suggests, "if you cannot carry on a conversation comfortably with a passenger it is too loud."
  - Beware of warnings. While toy manufacturers are not required to list the decibel level on packaging, some do list warnings that the toy should not be held close to ears. Since you know that is the first thing your child will do—it is probably best to skip this toy.
  - Forget the earbuds! Child friendly headphones should be included with PMPs and handheld video games as they limit sounds and are much safer than earbuds. Sony, KidzGear, and Maxell offer headphones designed specifically for children and they also have volume protection features.
- Get in the habit of carrying ear protection with you. Ear muffs (the kind that are worn externally and cover the entire ear) are most effective for small children; ear plugs can also help block the noise.
- The maximum volume level on the typical PMP is 105 dB, but listening to music

By Krystynn Krywko, Ed. D.

**A**s a parent you are concerned about the health of your child. You serve them healthy foods, have them brush and floss daily, make sure they get plenty of physical activity, and tuck them into bed at a decent hour. But when it comes to hearing health, many parents are not only unsure of how to protect their child's hearing, they are not clear about how their child's hearing is affected by noise in the first place.

## Why noise matters

The inner ear is lined with approximately 30,000 sensitive hair cells that convert sound energy into electrical signals that travel to the brain. Exposure to either very loud sounds, or continuous exposure for long periods of time, can bend or break these hair cells. Once the hair cells are damaged they don't grow back.

Your child's ear is much more sensitive than an adult's, so when your child is immersed in a noisy environment or playing with a noisy toy she is much more susceptible to noise induced hearing loss (NIHL), which can lead to permanent hearing damage.

at only 85 dB for a prolonged period of time can increase risk for hearing loss. Many companies are responding to the dangers of noise on young ears by providing consumer options. For example, parents are able to lock the volume at a specific limit on all Apple products. No matter how much a child “cranks” the volume button the sound will not go above the preset level.

- Set limits to help your child listen responsibly. Kathy Webb, executive director of the Sight and Hearing Association, located in St. Paul, Minnesota, recommends using the “60 percent/60 minute rule”, which means listening to music at no more than 60 percent of the maximum volume, for one hour a day.
- Talk to your child about how noise affects their hearing. Using age-appropriate language tell your child how a noisy toy or listening to music too long can affect their hearing. This helps to send the message

that hearing health is just as important as looking after the rest of their body.

Let your child know that it is important to take breaks from listening to music and that it is always okay to walk away from a noise if it is too loud.

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**What to do if you suspect a loss**

Dr. Robert Harrison, of The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto cautions that for a child with NIHL the degree of deficit is generally mild to moderate, yet even a mild hearing loss has the potential to interfere

with effective communication especially when it comes to learning in a noisy environment such as a classroom.

If you suspect your child’s might have a hearing loss then it is important that you have their hearing tested as soon as possible. Noreen Simmons, Executive Director, of the BC Family Hearing Resource Center in Surrey, BC, suggests that it is best to get a referral to a pediatric audiologist. Pediatric audiologists are not only trained to identify hearing loss, but they are also trained to look for other auditory disorders and to make appropriate recommendations as needed.

It is important that your child’s hearing is tested at least once a year. If there are additional risk factors involved (low birth weight, premature birth, progressive hearing loss) then additional testing might be required depending on the severity of the condition. ✦

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