

'tis the season for noisy toys

simple guidelines to protect your child's hearing

by Krystyann Krywko, EdD

Nothing shatters the silence of a holiday morning like the ear-splitting siren on your toddler's new fire truck, or the sound pulsating from the earbuds of your tween's new mp3 player. Let's face it: children's toys are loud. In fact, some toys designed for the preschool set are so loud that when they were tested for the Sight and Hearing Association's annual list of noisy toys, they blared at 129.2 and 119.5 decibels (dB). That's about as loud as a rock concert or an airliner at takeoff.

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 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.

A 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 leads to permanent hearing damage.

"It is the accumulated use of noisy toys and close exposure to loud sounds that we are concerned about," says Kathy Webb, executive director of the Sight & Hearing Association, in St. Paul, MN. "That is why we warn parents to be cautious and aware that some toys pose a risk of hearing loss."

So before you head out for holiday shopping, take into consideration the guidelines listed below. Also check out the Sight & Hearing Association's list of noisy toys, which was scheduled for posting in late November at sightandhearing.org.

- **Become aware of sound in small spaces.** Noisy toys become amplified in small indoor spaces. If you feel that certain toys are too loud for your child to play with inside (some trucks and musical instruments, for example), have your child play with them outside where the noise can be dispersed.
- **Beware of warnings.** While toy manufacturers are not required to list the deci-

bel level on their packaging, some do list warnings that the toy should not be held close to the ears. Since you know that the first thing your child probably will do is hold the toy close to his ears, it might be best to skip this toy.

- **Forget the earbuds!** Child-friendly headphones should be included with mp3 players and handheld video game gifts, as they limit sounds and are much safer to use than earbuds. Sony, KidzGear, and Maxell all offer headphones designed specifically for children, and they have volume protection features.
- **Control volume.** The maximum volume level on the typical mp3 player is 105 dB, but even listening to music at only 85 dB for a prolonged period of time can increase one's risk for hearing loss. Many companies therefore 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. Thus, 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 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 hearing.** Using age-appropriate language, tell your child how a noisy toy or listening to loud music too long can affect hearing. This helps to send the message that hearing health is just as important as looking after the rest of one’s body. **f**

how loud is too loud?

Kathy Webb, executive director of the Sight & Hearing Association, offers these suggestions when buying toys:

1. Play with the toy as much as you can at the store before you make a purchase. Press buttons, pull levers, and look to see if there is an off switch or mute button.
2. If a toy sounds too loud to you at the store, then it is too loud for your child.
3. Children rarely play with a toy the specific way that a manufacturer recommends. If the toy you are buying comes with a warning that it shouldn’t be held close to the ears, you are better off choosing a different toy.
4. If your child is absolutely set on getting a particular toy, or your child receives a noisy toy as a gift, try putting clear masking tape over the speakers to help reduce the volume.

Krystynn Krywko, EdD is a writer and education researcher who specializes in hearing loss and its impact on children and families. She and her young son were diagnosed with hearing loss one year apart.



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