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Auditory sensitivity

“Toilet refusal can be caused by sensitivity to the sound of bathroom hand dryers.”

Why does this happen?

- Noise overload in schools is a huge issue for children with autism.
- Children with autism can have an under- or over-reaction to sound. This might be too much noise or just some noises in particular.
- The child might find certain noises distracting or irritating. He may become highly anxious or appear to be in physical pain when exposed to certain sounds.
- Unpredictable sounds, such as a phone ringing or dog barking can cause unusual or fearful reactions.
- The child might make humming noises or squeal in order to mask out a noise that is disturbing him.
- Background noise can be so intrusive and distressing that the student cannot concentrate. The child may be unable to filter out this background noise and pay attention to what is being said. Low level noise can also be a problem, eg. air conditioner or computer humming, clock ticking.
- The acoustics in a gymnasium or large hall can be unbearable to a child with autism.

What you can do

- There is a huge pay-off for teachers who are prepared to familiarise themselves with and understand the student’s particular sensory issues. Remember each child has his/her own set of behaviours. Do not overgeneralise – autism is not like other disabilities.
- Try to keep background noise to a minimum. Some problem noises can be easily fixed, ie. replace rubber tips on chair legs to avoid them scraping on the floor. However other background noises that may cause a problem can be things that most people filter out, such as the hum of fluorescent lights, electric hand dryers, aeroplanes passing overhead, lawnmowers etc. It will be necessary to gradually desensitise the child to these sounds, increasing his ability to cope and act appropriately when they occur. Consult an occupational therapist for advice.
- Learning about human development and emotions will help the child develop an understanding of his senses and feelings. Encourage the child to identify and share his feelings if he is upset – and when he is feeling good!
- Have a quiet area for the student to retreat to when feeling overloaded. See [Creating a home base](#) for more information.
- If appropriate, play music in the classroom to mask out background noise or allow the student to listen to music through headphones during individual work.

- In physical education classes, the student may not cope well with the sound of a whistle. It may be helpful for the teacher to clap as a warning prior to blowing the whistle, if one must be used.
- Some children tolerate wearing ear plugs to filter out excessive noise. This may be an option if the student is unable to cope in situations like assembly or physical education classes. Industrial-type ear protectors may be appropriate in some classes, such as woodwork.