

## Hyperacusis guidance for schools and nurseries

### Advice from an Audiologist

Hyperacusis is common in autistic individuals. Audiologists have professional expertise in assessment, diagnosis and management of hyperacusis. NAIT sought advice from local expert (Dawn Lamerton, Principal Audiologist and Head of Service for paediatric audiology, NHS Lothian), who has kindly provided the information below for staff working in schools and nurseries.

### What is a Hyperacusis?

Hyperacusis is a condition where a child experiences distress and pain in response to sounds. These sounds tend to be every day sounds, which may or may not appear very loud to a person who does not experience hyperacusis.

There may be times when a child struggles with noises in school. Everyone's experience of hyperacusis is individual however common symptoms experienced may include distress, anxiety, agitation and avoidance of the sounds that they find distressing. During this time it may be more difficult for someone to concentrate as hyperacusis can be distressing and distracting. Experiencing anxiety can directly exacerbate the effects of hyperacusis.

### Understanding Hyperacusis?

- Hyperacusis is an impairment of the way in which a child perceives and processes certain sounds and cannot be measured or recorded independently.
- Hyperacusis is a real condition which can impact daily life.
- A child with Hyperacusis may tolerate some loud sounds with no difficulty, yet have real difficulty and distress when experiencing specific quieter sounds.
- A child experiencing Hyperacusis may develop anxiety in anticipation of the sounds they find distressing. This anxiety can cause an increased sensitivity to the way they perceive the sound.
- Sometimes increased anxiety surrounding sounds can lead to avoidance patterns of behaviours, which can impact everyday life.

### How can you help a child who has been diagnosed with Hyperacusis?

Hyperacusis will require a formal diagnosis – you can ask your local Audiology services how you can refer a child for support in obtaining a diagnosis.

If a child is diagnosed with Hyperacusis, the local audiology department is likely to follow a number of strategies with the aim to resolve the experiences of hyperacusis. Here are the strategies they are most likely to follow:

## Rehabilitation strategies:

### Behavioural Management

This is a form of therapy that looks to address raised anxiety and sound avoidance issues, and aims to reduce the hearing sensitivity. Here are the general principles of behavioural management as some of these may be useful in class.

1. Providing comfort and reassurance to the child when they exhibit distress to sounds.
2. Explaining the sound source to the child, making it clear why it makes its specific sound.
3. Providing ways to allow the child to exercise some control over the sounds. Perhaps by making the sound themselves or by finding ways to demystify with the sound source, perhaps using play.
4. Gently repeating the child's exposure to the sound may help them become more used to it.
5. Children's anxiety may increase if they are forced to remain in a situation that is causing the distress. It is important to allow them somewhere 'safe' to retreat to, should they require it.
6. The child may be reassured if they have permission to go to a 'quiet' area or even leave the classroom for a short while if they are distressed by a specific sound at school.

## Recalibration strategies:

Where a continuous sound is played at a low level into a child's hearing system to help recalibrate the ear's sensitivity and the way in which it processes sounds. This is a programme that is formally prescribed by an audiologist. It might take the following forms:

- An App downloaded to your phone or tablet
- Using a night-time sound enrichment device
- Using an ear level device

## Using Ear Defenders or Headphones?

While it may appear effective, the use of ear defenders is counterproductive to any treatment plans audiology will put in place. ***The continued use of ear defenders results in an increase in a child's auditory gain; which means that they become MORE sensitive towards sounds.*** If a child is formally being treated for Hyperacusis we would strongly recommend that the use of ear defenders is **NOT** used as this will impede resolution of the child's symptoms.