



Christmas toys can damage little ears

By Laura Strasser, Columbia Hearing Centers



What does your child's Christmas list and hearing loss have in common? Probably more than you think. In recent years, researchers have found hearing loss often begins with infants and toddlers. The culprit – toys.

Many toys designed to stimulate children can be dangerously loud. Because small children have short arms, they often listen to toys very close to their small, sensitive ears. When held directly to the ear, the child is exposed to as much as 120 dB of sound -- a damaging dose — the equivalent of a jet plane taking off. Noise at this level is painful and can result in permanent hearing loss. To make matters worse, little ones hold toys for a very long time, and listen to them over and over and over.

Research has shown an alarming increase of hearing loss among our youth – almost 15 percent of children ages 6-17 according to a 1998 study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association. This is crazy! Because hearing loss affects communication, it creates a negative impact on the child's social, vocational and emotional well-being. Exposed to an increasingly noisy world with an array of loud activities, gadgets and digital electronics to entice them, the risk can be widespread.

Noise-induced hearing loss is permanent -- once you lose your hearing from noise, you can't get it back. But noise-induced hearing loss is *preventable*. For the child whose ears are particularly vulnerable to noise, it is never too early to consider the need for hearing conservation. Just as a parent doesn't give a young child a toy with small pieces, parents *must* become educated about the dangers of loud toys.

So how loud is too loud? Workplace standards set by OSHA indicate continued exposure to noise over 85 dB can eventually harm your hearing. However, the Consumer Product Safety Commission does not have regulations addressing the volume of toys, even though some types of battery-driven toy guns and pistols create noise between 100 to 130 dB. Noise from music boxes (85-95 dB) can also be damaging.

Studies have shown that some toys, such as vehicles with sirens or horns, can emit noises of 90 decibels or higher – the equivalent of a lawnmower! Other toys that may pose a danger to a child's hearing include walkie talkies, talking dolls, and toys with cranks. Some of the noisiest products are talk-and-listen toys, promoted as educational, which feature a recorded voice.

Some more examples of noisy toys include...

- Certain rattles and squeaky rubber toys are measured at sound levels as high as 110 dBA.
- Musical toys, such as electric guitars, drums and horns, emit sounds as loud as 120 dBA.
- Toy phones for small children are measured between 123 and 129 dBA.
- Toys which are designed to amplify the voice are measured at up to 135 dBA.
- Toys producing firearm sounds emit volumes as loud as 150 dBA one foot away from the noise source.
- Noise emitted from cap guns can be measured in excess of 140 dBA.
- Teen-agers' personal stereos found they are used at levels between 102-104dBA
- Toy sirens and drills measure between 74 and 102 dBA 04dBA
- Toy robots and cars emit noise at levels between 82 and 100 dBA

To protect your children, the following tips...

- Listen to a toy before you buy it. Because of a child's shorter arm span, test a toy's loudness directly to your ear or up to 12 inches away. If it sounds loud to you, hurts your ears or causes ringing, it's too loud for your child and should not be purchased.
- Put masking or packing tape over the speaker on the toy. This will reduce the volume.
- Batteries can be removed or toys discarded if they are too noisy and pose a potential danger to hearing.
- Avoid buying toys that have a warning that they should not be used close to the ear.
- Encourage children to lower the volume on stereos and noisy computer games, especially when wearing headphones.

Protect your children. Be aware that noise causes hearing loss. Remember that once hearing is damaged, it cannot be restored. Our children deserve to be healthy and happy – that includes being able to hear.

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