

MEDIA RELEASE

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Deaf Awareness Week (21-27 September 2009)

DANGEROUS DECIBELS DISTRESSING OUR KINDY KIDS

The National Foundation for the Deaf's (NFD) latest survey reveals that preschool children are potentially being exposed to excessive noise levels while at play.

The Deaf Awareness Week 2009 survey of 65 early childhood centres from around the country showed that 20% of children had been affected by a high level of noise, demonstrating behaviours from putting their hands over their ears to being so distressed they cried.

The NFD recognises that there is an opportunity to educate children and their parents on hearing preservation for life and are working with early childhood centres to introduce initiatives that will result in better hearing protection.

NFD spokesperson, Nigel Murphy, said noise levels in early childhood centres were not being monitored and it appeared that in some cases noise was exceeding healthy levels.

"When you put a group of children in a room together you are always going to get a lot of noise but we'd like to see noise meters in all early childhood centres so the teachers can easily monitor and manage noise levels effectively.

"Parents and children can also be educated on what levels are safe and how to manage noise levels in the home. We see this as a valuable educational tool in hearing protection and preservation."

The survey showed that it was not just children being affected. Over one third of teachers reported experiencing buzzing/ringing in the ears from time to time and hearing loss which they believed could be as a result of years working in a noisy environment.

The NFD says the current legislation to protect children and teachers in early childhood centres is not adequate and needs reviewing.

"Children being children is not the sole cause of the problem. Often classrooms are poorly designed or designed for hygiene with an abundance of hard, easy to clean surfaces which makes rooms very reverberant and accentuates the problem," says Mr Murphy.

A simple noise meter with a green/yellow/red lighting system would immediately alert teachers and children to their noise levels and they can take action. The majority of early childhood centres spoken to welcomed this initiative, some having trialled noise meters in the past.

International research has shown that children under the age of six are much more sensitive to noise and can sustain acute cochlear damage far easier than in more mature people.

Research undertaken by Stuart McLaren at Massey University's Institute of Food Nutrition and Human Health showed that in his study of 32 early childhood centres more than three quarters of children and just under half the staff were exposed to dangerous levels of noise.

Mr McLaren said it is serious cause for concern and action needs to be taken.

“Excessive noise is not only harmful to hearing but it has been proven it also affects children’s learning. A code of practice on how best to evaluate the typical levels of noise in early childhood centres needs to be developed. The teachers are not audiologists – they need an easy to work noise metre that will quickly identify a problem.”

Mr McLaren has also been looking at the affect of noisy toys on children. Again, he believes current standards on noise levels of children’s toys are not satisfactory.

“While we can’t statistically report on the number of children exposed to dangerous levels of noise from their toys, it is suspected that a large number of children could be affected.

“A toy may be deemed within reasonable range of decibels but they can still damage hearing because of the unusual methods of play. Children use toys in unexpected ways and they don’t always follow the directions on the box. In particular, autistic children are well known to put things up to their eyes and ears and if this is done, some toys will definitely damage young ears,” says Mr McLaren

In his testing of a variety of noisy toys Mr McLaren found in many instances the toys, such as musical key boards or juke boxes, default to the highest volume. So when you first turn on the toy, the level of noise is excessive and you have to manually turn it down.

“The best thing parents can do when selecting toys is ‘try before you buy’. If it sounds too loud, it probably is.”

For further information:

www.nfd.org.nz

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**The research was conducted by NFD in July 2009. It involved a telephone interview of kindergartens, playcentres, Te Reo and other Language Nests*

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