# Autism and Hyperacusis – The Torment of Sound

March 20, 2015 by [Stella Waterhouse](http://www.autismdailynewscast.com/author/stellawaterhouse/)

Does your child ever block his ears or suddenly run away? Or become very agitated and upset at mealtimes or in noisy situations. Or simply refuse to enter a building or go into the garden? If so the clue to his behavior probably lies in the sensory differences: specifically his hearing.

The problem that causes such reactions is hyperacusis (hypersensitivity to sound), a painful and debilitating condition that can make some sounds seem louder than they actually are.

Worse still the person is generally unable to block out the sounds that hurt and that can leave them tormented by various everyday sounds that most of us ignore or at least tolerate.

Much of the research into hyperacusis has been done with older people who have tinnitus and yet hyperacusis actually affects a wide range of people, some of whom, like myself, have had the problem since childhood.

Josephine Marriage, the former Head of Pediatric Audiology at Addenbrooke’s Hospital, Cambridge, in the UK has a particular interest in hyperacusis. Her research showed that each person had individual sounds that they found intolerable, ranging from noisy washing machines and vacuum cleaners to relatively quiet sounds such as a tissue being taken out of a box, a newspaper being folded or a dog barking in the distance. Similarly in my informal research people identified a clock ticking in the flat next door, the hum of a fan, the sound of butterfly wings and even the noise of other people eating.

Nowadays everyone is aware of noise pollution but, unless they have experienced hyperacusis themselves, most people do not appreciate how devastating its effects can be. In fact, because this is somewhat obscure, some people are unaware they have it – although their nearest and dearest may recognize that they become irritable, short tempered and stressed in certain situations.

Those people who are aware of it may go out of their way, often literally, to avoid particular situations as with one man who, come rain or shine, went out for a walk every time his wife did the vacuuming. It can also affect people’s social lives as they tend to avoid noisy situations preferring to be on their own or with just a few other people.

But when you cannot control your environment things become extremely difficult as with the unfortunately named Mrs Fussy who finally took her neighbors to court because the noise from the birds in the aviary in their garden kept her indoors. Easy to laugh perhaps but if you have ever experienced anything like it you would know that hyperacusis can indeed make life a misery.

Perhaps some well-known sufferers can tell us how it feels? Writer V S Naipaul gave a clear indication of the distress such hyper-sensitivity can cause when he said how ‘immensely happy’ he was when his hearing ‘began to degenerate.’

Similarly Annie Proulx, the well-known and highly acclaimed author of “The Shipping News” and “Brokeback Mountain” to name but two, finds excessive noise hard to cope with, which may account for the fact that she lives in the wilds of Wyoming, real – isolated – cowboy country.

In an interview entitled Dirt Rich writer Marianne MacDonald shed some light on this fascinating woman, finding that Annie Proulx couldn’t bear a lot of noise and that, as a kid ‘the most dreadful sound in the world’ was her mom vacuuming.

No surprise then that hyperacusis has such a dramatic effect on children with ASD especially when they have no control over the situation they find themselves in – as at school.

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**Top Tips**

\* Ensure he or she has a quiet place of one’s own where he or she can go when noisy things (like vacuuming, washing up, lawn mowing etc.) are going on.
\* Try to determine which sounds she or he dislikes and the situations or places in which they occur. You can then encourage her or him to use earplugs or a MP4 player if appropriate so that one can cope more easily.

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Hyperacusis though is not the only auditory difference that can affect such children as you’ll see next time.