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Hear Today – Gone tomorrow!

damage to hearing can start at an early age

Ours used to be a quiet street until a new resident moved in. You could hear him coming a mile off, at least the music he played in his car. We call it doof-doof. From outside there doesn't seem to be much of a tune, just a constant pulsating beat seemingly powerful enough to blow the windows out. Imagine what this is doing to the driver's hearing.

Parents and carers are very conscious of hearing problems in children. These may be birth defects which can or cannot be remedied; but surely this is genetic or a quirk of nature and nobody's fault – or is it? Remember the guy in the doof-doof car? Well, as soon as he gets home he switches on his hi-fi. We can hear it half-way down the street. I wonder if he has kids and what his "music" is doing to their hearing; but if he has a pregnant wife he's not doing his unborn child any favours either. They can hear, you know, even in the womb – voices, comforting sounds, angry words. Unfortunately for them, when dopy Dad cranks up the boom-box, all they can do is suffer; and there's a good chance they eventually will.

Taking this a stage further, most children accept the standards they are set. It seems many are brought up to believe music can only be appreciated if it is so loud that they can't hear themselves speak. And where's the need when they can text? Then, wearing earphones, they can wander the streets playing tunes in a personal concert hall; annoying no-one, communicating as they go with friends who are doing exactly the same – slowly sending themselves deaf!

Eventually children grow up, height-wise, anyway; smart-wise, maybe not. Health and safety are paramount in the workplace. Loud noise from machinery is taken care of with ear muffs. But have a closer look at some of the wearers and thin wires may be noticed trailing down from inside them, probably to a mini-music player. The bellowing racket emanating from it would probably mask the whine of the brick saw on its own: the ear muffs being obligatory are just for show.

I figured I'd write this article a bit tongue-in-cheek in the hopes that it would be entertaining as well as informative. Being honest, though, the subject is no joking matter. Damage to hearing affects how we respond to others and situations. Being unable to understand every word often leads to misinterpretation of what is said.

Old lady standing by the kerb: "Could you help me across the road, young man?"

Teenager: "Sure." He pauses to check his watch. "It's ten after two." Then he walks on.

That sounds pretty silly, but it's the thin end of the wedge. Employing similar reciprocal mistakes in different scenarios, important instructions can be misunderstood, putting

one's self or another at risk; and even in normal conversation, missing some words and having to assume others can place a whole new meaning on a friendly chat, turning it into an antagonistic exchange. Chinese whispers can be funny, but they can also be dangerous.

Deafness, whether permanent or temporary, applied to everyday activities is occasionally disastrous. My daughter had a white cat with one blue eye and one red. Because of this, the vet said the animal was probably deaf. It failed to hear the car coming and died. People have suffered the same fate listening to loud music through earphones when crossing the road. One woman was wearing them while out jogging. She didn't hear the approach of the man who attacked her, and she paid a heavy price. The last two examples weren't tragic accidents at all and could have been avoided.

Going back to basics, loss of hearing contributes to learning difficulties from an early age and on into adulthood. Children hampered by this condition are disadvantaged because they miss too much of what they are taught. A good portion of the time it is exacerbated, thanks to their love of loud music; and as their hearing continues to deteriorate, they have to turn the volume up even more – doof-doof, deaf-deaf! The next step is swapping earphones for hearing aids. Responsible carers, please don't let this happen.

- ✓ Keep the noise in your cars and homes at a safe, acceptable level.
- ✓ While your kids have their earphones in, whip one off and have a listen.
- ✓ Watch for signs and ask their teachers to do the same.
- ✓ Try the odd clapping test behind them when they aren't looking to see if they respond.
- ✓ In a normal voice, ask them a question, one which they are most likely to answer; but turn away first so that they can't see your lips moving.
- ✓ And if there's just the slightest chance that your child could be experiencing a hearing problem, have it tested by a medical professional without delay.

Do you hear what I'm saying? If not, you really should get your own hearing checked.

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