

Sights & Sounds

A PUBLICATION OF THE SIGHT & HEARING ASSOCIATION

Noisy toys: annoying or harmful? Half of toys tested are louder than a chainsaw

Walk down the aisles of any toy store and you can't miss them — toys that make noise. But are they merely annoying, or could they be harmful to your child's hearing?

Every year just before the busiest toy-shopping season, the Sight & Hearing Association tests a variety of toys — taken right off local toy store shelves — for potentially dangerous noise levels.

This year, seven of 14 toys tested by SHA and researchers at the University of Minnesota sounded off over 100 decibels (dB). Say what? That's louder than a chainsaw.

The top offender on this year's list, Kid Connection's Electronic Guitar, blared at 117 dB — loud enough to risk hearing damage in about 10 minutes. The Elite Operations Quantum Blast Set blasted at 114 dB. And, similar to last year's list, two books meant for 18-month-olds



These are some of the loudest toys on this year's Noisy Toys List.

topped 100 dB. In fact, all of the toys tested measured over 90 dB directly at the speaker of the toy.

Exposure to noise levels above 85 dB for eight hours is the federal threshold for

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Preventing the needless loss of vision and hearing through screening, education and research





Researchers urge use of earplugs at concerts

A recent study by University of Minnesota researchers, including SHA board member Dr. Samuel Levine, found that earplugs can reduce hearing damage at concerts. But the news may fall on deaf ears. That's because regular concert-goers seem to resist wearing earplugs.

To examine sound levels and the effectiveness of earplugs, Dr. David Opperman at the U of M medical school offered volunteers free tickets to sold-out concerts of various genres: rock, pop and heavy metal. All they had to do was agree to wear earplugs. Several people they approached actually refused, but eventually

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hearing protection. Levels above 90 dB can cause permanent hearing loss with relatively short exposure.

Drs. Chris Hilton and Emiro Caicedo, both resident otolaryngologists at the University of Minnesota, tested the toys. What they found surprised them.

"We were especially surprised that the toy guitar was so loud," said Dr. Hilton. "With toys, you need to think like a kid. An adult wouldn't put his ear up to a speaker, but a child would. This can dramatically increase the sound levels."

"Also," added Dr. Caicedo, "the number of times a child plays with the toy will play a role in exposure time and this could pose a risk."

Because of a child's shorter arm span, toys are often potentially more dangerous to hearing because children hold them closer to their ears. In the Sight & Hearing Association study, the toys were repeatedly tested at distances simulating how a child might hold the toy, directly near the ear (0 inches) and at arm's length (10 inches). A sound-proof acoustic chamber was used to ensure accurate measurements.

Until last year, there were no regulations in the United States regarding the

loudness of toys. A new acoustics standard (ASTM F963), adopted and revised in March 2004 by the American Society of Testing and Materials, states that a hand-held, table-top or crib toy cannot exceed 90 dB 25 cm (approx. 10 in.) from the surface of the toy. Compliance with the standard is voluntary.

"We are thrilled that the toy industry

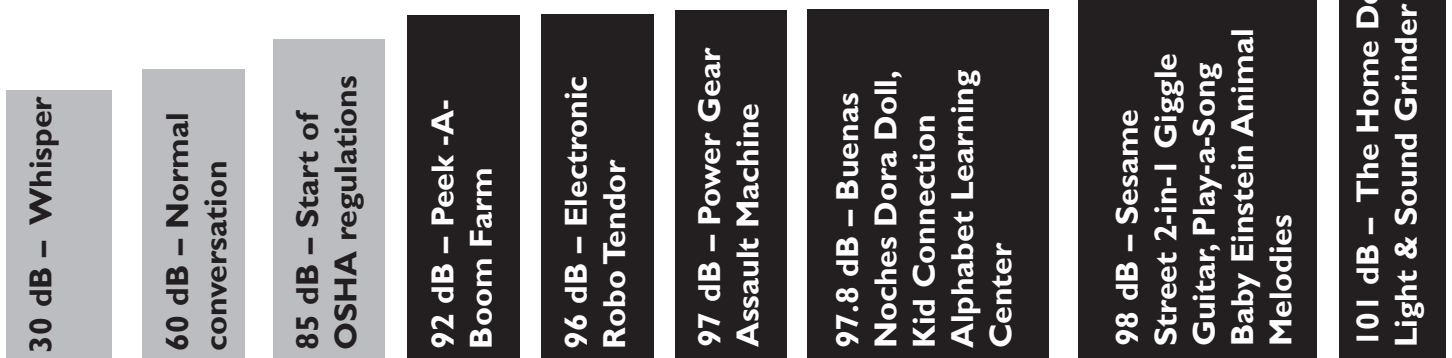


The Kid Connection Electronic Guitar sounded off at 117 dB, the loudest toy on the list. To see SHA's Noisy Toys List, visit www.sightandhearing.org and click on Health Issue.

and consumer safety groups have finally realized that acoustics are an important part of overall toy safety," said Julee Sylvester, Sight & Hearing Association spokesperson. "While none of the toys we tested pose an immediate risk for hearing damage, some could definitely pose a risk in a matter of minutes. We want consumers to know what sound levels the toys are capable of producing so they can make their own decisions."

Despite the new acoustics standard, the toy industry continues to assert that toys are not harmful to hearing.

In the Toy Industry



Association's statement regarding the sound level of toys, it writes "what makes people call a toy 'too noisy' is a matter of opinion and personal preference — just as some people prefer soft, classical music to loud rock music."

Sylvester disagrees. "100 decibels is 100 decibels, whether it's Mozart, Metallica — or Mattel."

Unlike with choking hazards and other injuries, there are no injury statistics on toys and hearing loss. That's because noise-induced hearing loss is nearly impossible to track its origination.

"Noise-induced hearing loss is cumulative," explains Sylvester. "It doesn't typically happen from one event; it gradually happens over time.

That's why it's important to start protecting hearing at a young age."

To protect your children, the Sight &

Hearing Association offers the following tips:

- Listen to a toy before you buy it. If it sounds loud to you, it's too loud for your child.

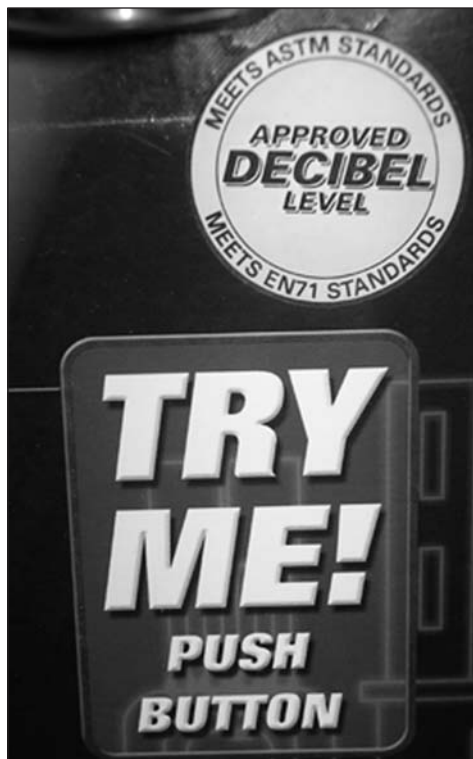
- Report a loud toy. Call the Consumer Product Safety Commission at 800/638-2772 or the Sight & Hearing Association at 800/992-0424.

- Put masking or packing tape over the speaker on the toy. This will help reduce the volume.



To highlight quiet toys this year, the Sight & Hearing Association added two toys to its "Ear-Friendly" list. The list contains a handful of sound-producing toys the association recommends as safe to hearing. This year, Liberator Lights and

Sound Military Helicopter and Vtech's Fly & Learn Globe made the list. *



Toys beckon shoppers to try them out. This toy even promoted the "approved decibel" rating. Our advice: Listen before you buy.

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29 volunteers, aged 17 to 59, complied.

Each participant agreed to have audiograms recorded immediately before and after the concert. Seats were randomly assigned, as was whether a person would be wearing earplugs.

The study found that 64 percent of those without earplugs had a "significant" temporary hearing loss, compared with 27 percent wearing earplugs. Equally concerning, the study found that the sound intensity was high throughout a concert venue, regardless of the type of music or seating location. Decibel levels averaged 99.8 dB(A) and maximum values exceeded 125.6 dB(A). The bottom-line? Everyone attending any kind of concert is at risk for hearing loss.

That means, to protect themselves, concert-goers' attitudes toward hearing protection and the use of earplugs need to change. Musicians wear them; the same should be true for audience members.

The authors of this study, titled "Incidence of Spontaneous Hearing Threshold Shifts During Modern Concert Performances," are David Opperman, M.D., William Reifman, N.P., P.A., Robert Schlauch, PhD, and Samuel Levine, M.D. of the University of Minnesota Medical Center. *



Preschool Screening Program

At the Sight & Hearing Association, we know how important it is to screen early for vision and hearing problems, and we spend a lot of time stressing the importance of screening to parents and preschool directors. We received the following note this year from two grateful parents who were impacted by our screening. Their words said it best.

“Dear Sight & Hearing Association,

How can I ever thank you enough for saving my son’s eyesight. On Feb. 1, 2005, you screened my son, Ethan Havens, at Camden Community Preschool. Ethan had done three previous screenings and passed, but with your screening he failed. I took him to the eye doctor and the vision in his right eye was very poor. The doctor said if he didn’t wear glasses right away he would soon lose control over the eye and then eventually not be able to see out of it at all. The doctor said because of early screening, Ethan’s eye should be fine within a couple of years. I just wanted to let you all know how important you all are and that you do make a huge difference. I can’t thank you enough.

Best wishes, Nikki and Andrew Havens”



Ethan Havens

Sight & Hearing Association (SHA) is formerly known as The Minnesota Society for the Prevention of Blindness and Preservation of Hearing.

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Please send story ideas, comments or address changes to: Sight & Hearing Association,

674 Transfer Road, St. Paul, MN 55114.

*Ph: 651-645-2546
800-992-0424*

*Visit our Web site at
www.sightandhearing.org*

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Sight & Hearing Association
674 Transfer Road
St. Paul, MN 55114-1402

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