

Sensory and Sensibility



Issue #5

For children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), head banging is a common way to self-soothe and communicate needs. Rhythmic habits trigger the calming reflex in infants and toddlers. Many babies begin head banging around six months of age, but neurotypical children usually will not continue the behavior after the age of three.

What triggers head banging?

When a child diagnosed with autism head bangs past the age of two and a half or three, there is likely one of four things happening:

- 1. The child is in pain*
- 2. The child is attempting to communicate*
- 3. The child is attention seeking, or*
- 4. The child is experiencing sensory overload or a sensory deficit.*

Pain

With external pain, like a toothache or an ear infection, the head banging is done to distract from the pain. If you discover that your child regularly uses head banging as a way to manage pain, you should speak with a communication specialist to help your child develop new ways to show you where he/she is experiencing pain.

Communication/ Attention

More often than not, if a child is head banging to gain a sense of control, a secondary reason may be that they are trying to communicate. Children who are nonverbal will seek ways to communicate, often through movement. If a child knows head banging will cause a caregiver to rush over and intervene, he/she is likely to use this to his/her advantage to help get needs met. This goes hand-in-hand with attention seeking.

Sensory overload or Sensory deficit

Children who head bang for attention may be experiencing a sensory overload or deficit, and in the moment, may be unable to otherwise communicate their needs. When children with autism experience a sensory overload, their neurotransmitters are unable to process the input their brains are receiving. Noise, visuals, and even smells and tastes that neurotypical individuals are able to tune out or may find pleasing can cause extreme discomfort and overwhelm children with autism. The sensation of head banging is one they can control and on which they can place their focus

Strategies to Stop Head Banging

Injury Prevention

- Provide student with a helmet.
- Consider padding the area to protect the student.
- Track date/time/antecedent to determine if the behavior is pain induced.

Decrease Sensory:

- Consider noise cancelling headphones.
- Try sensory "breaks" in the classroom.
- Additionally, some children head bang as a part of a routine they have developed to prepare for sleep. **Autistic children often find the repetitive movements tire and soothe them. Establishing a bedtime routine with your child that includes some form of exercise or kinesthetic movements may be helpful in preparing him/her for sleep**

Increase Sensory:

*Children who are **under-stimulated**, lonely, or bored may head bang as a way to stimulate their vestibular systems. They are able to provide themselves with their own sensory input by stimulating themselves in a way the feels good to them.*

Autistic children who are under-stimulated may respond well to a

- vibrating pillow,
- weighted blanket,
- gentle touch, or a
- well-secured bouncing chair,
- yoga ball chair, or rocking chair

Communication System:

- Work with PECS or AAC system to teach yes-no and a few basic core words (finished, stop, want).

Use visual in the classroom to support communication.

Putting Together a Plan for Head Banging

So... with the basics outlined, how do you even start? First decide on the function of the behavior. If you need help on determining function, check out this post: [What's the Function](http://www.NoodleNook.net) at www.NoodleNook.net.

1. **Put some visuals in place.** On a student's desk put a "I need a break" card or "Finished" icon on the desk.
2. **Get a timer.** Use it to limit the demands on a student (set the timer so a student is able to work for short cycles). You can alternatively set it for yourself to remember to praise a student to provide the positive attention intermittently.
3. When you see the behavior coming (or it starts) **limit the sensory information in the classroom.** Lower the lights, limit the noise, and allow your student to sit in a different or preferred spot in the classroom. This is also a great time to lighten the load by minimizing the academics or presenting them in smaller chunks.
4. **Assess the situation.** Did it improve or worsen? Time to get some padding and protective items in the classroom for the student? Now is the time to check.
5. **Make a sign for 'safe hands' or 'hands on desk'** (whichever you prefer).
6. Grab the timer back and find a **motivating object to use as a reinforcer** (and it may be an edible). Start to reward your student for small intervals with no head banging- the time will depend on the student. Slowly increase the amount of time until you start to see longer intervals without head banging.

Remember, you will try these one at a time and allow some processing to see the effect of each one.

It can be super horrifying when you see a student hurting themselves and unable to help... but you are not powerless. Try this plan and see what progress you make. Remember, you are looking for the function of the behavior as you work with the steps.

Good Resource 

Head Banging in Autism

How to Stop Self-Injury



www.NoodleNook.Net 

Good Resource 

www.autismparentingmagazine.com/autism-self-harm/