

Head Banging

Information Sheet

What is it?

Head banging is a form of self-injurious behaviour, where a person may repetitively hit their head with closed fists, using an open palm, or banging their head against walls, floors, or other solid surfaces. Some children may also hit their head onto their limbs e.g. forearm or knee. Headbanging often causes distress to parents/carers who witness this.

Head banging is more prevalent among individuals with Autism compared to the general population, often due to difficulties with communication, emotional regulation and sensory processing needs. It can also be an issue for children who have other conditions such as Global Developmental Delay or Learning Disabilities.

What can I do?

Understanding the reasons behind your child's headbanging can be complex and take time. Prioritise making adjustments to keep them safe and then you can look to identify the main causes or triggers for the behaviour.

If your child is head banging, look at ways to make the environment safer:

- Cover/add padding to sharp corners (e.g on tables)
- Contact your local Adaptations Team for further support and assessment of your home environment.
- Offer safer alternatives for them to crash their bodies (e.g. a pile of pillows, duvet, bed, PE mat)
- If they tend to head bang in the same area, look at ways to make this area safe and put up visual supports such as a stop sign.
- Establish a consistent routine and use a visual timetable to support any changes in routine. This can help to reduce anxiety.

Potential causes and strategies

There are many reasons why your child may be banging their head which can be difficult to ascertain. Try to pinpoint what happened just before the episode of them banging their head as this will help you find the cause, particularly if your child is non-verbal or pre-verbal, or cannot articulate why they are hitting their head.

Children and young people may engage in head-banging for several reasons. Understanding the cause can help determine ways to support the child and address the behaviour. Here are some common triggers for head-banging in children:

1. Communication difficulty and frustration: Non-verbal or pre-verbal children may head-bang as a way to express frustration, especially when they are unable to communicate their needs, wants, or emotions effectively.

To help with this, you can:

- Use a social story to teach why head banging is dangerous (see example)
- Use visual supports to help your child communicate their emotions
- If your child has a Speech and Language Therapist, speak to them as they may be able to give some specific advice for your child.

2. Pain or Discomfort: If a child is experiencing pain or discomfort (e.g., due to illness, injury, or a medical condition such as toothache or digestive issues), they might engage in head-banging as a way of communicating distress particularly if they have difficulties with communication. If you feel your child's behaviour may be a result of pain, contact your GP or liaise with your school nursing team for advice.

3. Emotional Regulation: Head-banging may occur when a child is feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or upset. It's can act as a form of self-soothing or an expression of intense emotion when they don't have other ways to cope or communicate how they are feeling.

4. To Gain Immediate Attention: Some children may learn that head-banging gets attention from caregivers or others around them, even if that attention is negative (like a response of concern). Try to model how your child can gain your attention in a positive way.

5. Routine or Transition Stress: Some children may struggle with changes in routine or transitions. The uncertainty of these events may cause anxiety or frustration at not knowing what to expect, which could manifest in head-banging.

6. Trying to escape demands: If you are in the middle of an activity when your child starts to bang their head, it may be that they are using head banging is a way of stopping the activity. If this is the case, you can try implementing the following strategies:

- Ensuring the challenge of the task is just right
- Use a visual timer so they know how long they need to sit and focus for
- Use a visual timetable so they know the demands of them for the day

7. Sensory Processing Issues: Many children with ASC have sensory processing challenges, where they may experience under or over responsivity to sensory stimuli. There are some theories that head-banging can be a way for them to self-regulate or respond to overstimulation or sensory overload. In some cases, children may head-bang to seek deep tactile and proprioceptive input (sensation to the joints). The sensation of pressure or impact can be soothing for them.

To help with this, you can:

- Provide regular proprioceptive and deep tactile input; big squeeze cuddles, heavy muscle work, massage to hands, feet, head, arm squeezes (avoiding joints), rolling under a gym ball, push/pull/carry activities, sensory body sock, use of punch bag or martial arts dummy, Boundex cuddle box.
- Identify sensory triggers which may cause distress to your child and occur prior to head banging e.g. loud unexpected noises, or light touch during self-care activities.
- Keep hands busy using items like slim, putty, hand creams, foam etc depending on the child or young person's sensory preferences.
- Use a sensory body sock.

It's important for caregivers to observe the behaviour in context to determine if there are patterns or specific triggers. Working with healthcare professionals, such as a paediatrician, occupational therapist, or behavioural therapist, can help develop strategies to reduce or manage head-banging and address any underlying issues.

Example social story

Sometimes, when I have big feelings or strong energy in my body, I might bang my head.

I might do this when:

- I feel worried, angry, or upset.
- I need to feel something strong in my body.
- I want to calm down or feel in control.
- I am finding sounds, lights, or feelings too much.



It is okay to have these feelings. Everyone has big feelings sometimes.

But when I bang my head, it can hurt me.

- I might get a bruise or a bump.
- I might feel dizzy or sore.
- If I bang very hard, I could cause serious injury.



I deserve to be safe. I deserve to feel good in my body.



There are other ways I can help my body and brain without hurting myself.



Some safer things I can try are:

- Pushing my hands or back against a wall.



- Using a weighted blanket or cushion.



- Doing strong pushes, like push-ups against the floor or wall.



- Jumping on a trampoline or bouncy surface.



- Hugging a soft toy or pillow tightly.



- Listening to music that helps me feel calm or powerful.



- Squeezing a stress ball or playdough.



- Asking for deep pressure squeezes from someone I trust.



I can try different activities and see which ones help me feel better.

- If I feel like I want to bang my head, I can tell an adult I trust.



- They can help me find a safer way to calm my body.



- I am learning to keep myself safe.



- I am strong.



- I am important.



- I can find ways that help me feel good without hurting myself



If you have any comments about this leaflet or the service you have received you can contact :

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Broad Street Plaza
Northgate
Halifax
HX1 1UB

Children's Therapies
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Greenhead Road
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HD1 4EW

www.cht.nhs.uk

If you would like this information in another format or language contact the above.

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المذكور أعلاه"