

When to seek medical advice

Please visit your GP if your child is head banging after three years of age, **or seems to be hurting themselves**, and seek advice to rule out developmental reasons.

If you would like further help in managing your child's head banging, then speak to your GP or Health Visitor.

You can also contact First Steps directly, who are here to help;

For more information, help, and advice, please contact:

First Steps

Early Intervention & Community Psychology Service

Hackney Ark
Downs Park Road
London E8 2FP
Tel: 020 7014 7135
Fax: 020 7014 7251

Further information is also available at:

<http://www.understandingchildhood.net/>

<http://www.zerotothree.org/>

If you have any issues or concerns please contact:

Patient Advice and Liaison Service
(PALS): 020 8510 7315/7728

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Clinical Psychologists
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How to manage head banging in young children

A self-help information leaflet for parents



Incorporating hospital and community health services, teaching and research



This leaflet aims to help parents manage head banging in young children. Based on our knowledge and experience of working with families, we hope this answers many of your questions. Please talk to a member of our team if you have any further questions.

What is head banging?

Head banging is when a child knocks their head on a solid object (e.g. a wall or bars of a cot). They may also rock their whole upper body at the same time. It may happen when they are tired, in their sleep, or during a temper tantrum.

How common is it?

Head banging is **very common**. It is thought that up to 20% of healthy children head bang during the first few years. It is a normal developmental process. It usually begins towards the end of the first year. It can then peak between 18 and 24 months, and ease off by around four years of age.

Is it harmful?

It is unlikely to be harmful. Children don't tend to engage in habits to injure themselves. It is unlikely they will bang their head hard enough to cause pain or brain injury. It won't affect their development. It can look and sound violent. However, many experts suggest that head banging provides children with a sensation similar to what they experienced in the uterus (i.e. when they were constantly rocked and jostled). Toddlers love movement (e.g. jumping, tumbling, and being swung).

Why do children head bang?

Comfort: The rhythmic movement may be a comfort mechanism similar to rocking.

Balance: It can test brain systems and improve balance.

Stimulation: Children may head bang for stimulation.

Self-soothing and relaxation: Head banging can be a way to release tension (e.g. to help sleep).

Distraction: Some young children may head-bang for relief if they are **teething** or suffering from an **ear infection**.

Attention: If your child is frustrated or angry, head banging may become part of a temper tantrum. The more attention they receive for doing it, the more likely they will repeat it.

Development problems: Head banging is common in children with autism. However, head banging alone rarely signals a serious developmental problem. Children with autism will usually display other symptoms (e.g. by around 14 months of age they won't be pointing to objects they want, won't track your gaze, and won't engage in pretend play).

What is the best way to deal with it?

As long as your **child is healthy and developing normally**, the best way to deal with head banging is to **ignore it**. Giving it attention will worsen the habit, especially if it occurs during tantrums. **Distracting them** with a toy or offering a drink may stop them.

Tap into your **child's love of rhythm** by encouraging them to play marching games or 'air drums' (e.g. beating a rhythm on cushions). **Rhythmical music** may also help to calm your child. A ticking clock placed in his room will give them a regular, rhythmic sound to focus on as they drift off to sleep.

If your baby sleeps in a cot, regularly check the bolts and screws aren't being loosened. Attaching a piece of foam rubber to the wall will reduce noise. If your toddler sleeps in a bed, move it away from the wall.

