

Please Don't Be Offended— I Intend to Protect My Hearing

BY CHRISTOPHER AROTIN



The Day My Sister and I Stopped Talking

Thanksgiving 2021. I mean, we talk now as in I still have her number and all that; we just aren't friends anymore. It all started because my niece, my sister's youngest, had a temper tantrum in the living room.

It was a full on fit with no end in sight. Rubber body on the floor, screaming, kicking, you get the idea. One parent, my sister, is gently watching over this fit. The other parent, my brother-in-law, is trying to engage me in small talk that I can barely hear over the ear-piercing exclamations of a 3-year-old. Here's where I made a mistake.

I walked right on over to that kid and I told her to stop it. I even followed up with some consequences, if her screams continued, I would take her into another room to scream. I know, I know — maybe the only thing that gets you alienated faster than telling someone how to raise their kid is actively doing it for them. I could have handled myself better, I should have, but I didn't.

In the days to come, I apologized for overstepping my bounds. My sister forgave me, my brother-in-law did not (but that's another story). As part of my apology, I also promised that if I needed something from my sister's kids in the future, I would address the parents, not the kids. Bring it up to good old mom and dad and then let them handle it.

I felt pretty good about my apology. I stated the actions I regretted, showed remorse for them, and explained how I would make changes to ensure those actions would not happen again in the future. I did however, ask my sister for something in return.

It Happens to All Parents

You see, this isn't the first time my sister's kids have performed this terrible dance of screaming death. In fact, it happens just about every time our families get together. She's got three kids, all under the age of seven. She believes that telling her kids not to scream will teach them that emotions are not okay. In short, it's okay to have big emotions and big emotions come with big screams.

Now, I can see that logic. I, personally, don't believe that to be the case. But I can see the A to B connection. And you know what? They're her kids; she gets to raise them how she wants. What I asked her for, was to not let those decibel-destroying big emotions blow out my ear drums.

I measured my six-year-old nephew's bedtime screams once, before I was told by dad to put away my decibel meter. His hissy fit was pushing over 100 decibels. To give you some context, a motorcycle engine is about 95 decibels and anything over 70 is dangerous

to your hearing over longer exposure. Anything above 110 and you'll have permanent ear injury in less than two minutes.

You ever leave a concert and things sound a little quieter, or funny, on your walk back to the car? It's because the hair cells inside your ear that are responsible for hearing bend too much when you are exposed to loud sounds. They get stuck and all bent out of shape. Your hearing comes back to normal over the next day or so when those hairs straighten themselves out again. But here's the thing, some of them die when this happens. And once they die, well, death is permanent.

We are born with about 16,000 hair cells in our cochlea and by the time you start to get poor results on an audio test, 30 to 50 % of those hairs are already dead and gone. We have laws against striking our fellow humans in the ear, but no one is out there telling your fitness instructor to turn it down. A wind-up punch from a five-year-old in the arm will heal in 30 seconds. That same 5-year-old can produce an audio bombardment to your hearing that will last 30 years.

How Can We Protect Our Ears?

Well, in the case of a rock concert, your favorite fitness class, or a screaming child, the solution is the same. Throw in some earplugs, put on some noise-reducing earmuffs, or limit your exposure by finding a quieter part of the concert venue or home to be in. I wanted to make sure my sister knew that when I was going to hang with her again, I was going to be prepared with some ear protection or, if it got too bad, I would have to leave.

I thought this was reasonable. After all, my sister begs my mother to use her hearing aids to enhance her hearing, why not take measures to protect one's hearing? An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, they say. Not to mention, scream all you want kids, I'm good! And...my sister said no.

You might be asking yourself, okay, what did she say no to? Did she say no, you can't use ear plugs around her kids? Or no, I wouldn't be allowed to leave her house after her kids started screaming? Or maybe no, we won't move the jackhammer child to a quieter place in the home to live out their exorcism in peace? You understood correctly. She said no to all of that. All of those sensory saving solutions are unacceptable as they would, again, teach the child that emotions are bad to have.

And there you have it. I'm unable to protect my hearing around my sister's kids and therefore, I don't see my sister's kids anymore. Considering I have a seven-year-old myself, there aren't many times when sis and I are going to just get together on our own, you know?

Some of you might be twisting your brains a little bit right now. Who's in the wrong here? But this isn't a Marvel movie. It is possible for two people to believe in opposing views or values and both be "right."

Parents of Screamers Have it Hard

I have to say, my sister is a great mom all around. She knows how to protect her kids. I'll give you an example. At the playground those kids are so coated in sunscreen, they look like Mark Zuckerberg on a surfboard. Patagonia hats, shades, and SPF shirts too. All very Colorado. She knows how to use sun protection.

I must also tell you that my sister is a very strong and inspirational woman. In fact, at the end of 2019, just before the pandemic, she was diagnosed with stage three breast cancer. She did chemo, radiation, and surgeries, pretty much all on her own because of COVID. And let me tell you, she was fierce with those mask mandates. And rightfully so! I mean, she was immunocompromised and had every right to be cross with people who refused to follow masking rules. This was a deadly disease, and she knew how to put on a mask to protect her immune system.

Do you see where I am going with this? My sister, she's smart. She knows and believes in simple steps to protect her skin from the sun and her immune system from disease. But hearing, why is that one optional for some reason? Maybe it's like sunscreen back in the day. When everyone went to tanning beds and rubbed oil on themselves. Then...Melanoma.

The number of adults in the United States older than age 20 with hearing loss is expected to almost double in coming decades. And hearing loss is proven to lead to other health issues, like dementia.

You Be You, and I'll Be Me

But you know what? I can't change my sister's mind and it's not my place to try and change her mind. Again, I disagree, but her ears and her kids' ears are not mine and she's allowed to teach them, or not teach them, whatever she wants.

But I have to stand my ground, too. My sister can't force me to pay with my hearing, or my son's hearing, as the entry fee to hang out with her family. In fact, no one can make me feel ashamed to use my ear plugs. And I don't think using my earplugs should make anyone else, adult or small child, feel ashamed either.

You know where I use earplugs?

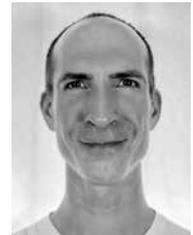
In spin class; it is loud as all get out and no one ever seems to mind. I use them when I vacuum, so much more peaceful. I even use them during quiet times to get a better night's sleep and right now, while I write this, to help improve my concentration and focus.

And now, I invite you to turn down your headphones a little bit and get yourself a nice pair of drugstore foam earplugs. Just a couple bucks for an ear-saving miracle. Most plugs come with

a fancy little plastic case too! Carry them with you; use them when it's loud. Or not, that's cool too. You made it this far; you like reading, right? But please, don't take it as an insult when I pop my earplugs in next to you and your baby on the plane. It's not meant to make you or your baby feel bad. It's not actually about you at all. It's all about me and my love for my ears. **HL**

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