



Tips for Supporting Children & Young People Who Hear Voices

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| 1. Don't panic | 2. Space to talk | 3. No assumptions | 4. Reassure |
| 5. Give hope | 6. Listen to beliefs | 7. Keep toolkit handy | 8. Signpost |

1. Don't Panic

If a child tells you they're hearing voices (or having other unusual experiences), the most important thing you can do is to stay calm. Children can be acutely sensitive to the reactions of others and can learn how to deal with/understand their voices from people around them.

If you stay calm you're showing them that it's OK. If you seem anxious, afraid or uncomfortable you're showing them that there really IS something to worry about.

2. Provide space to talk

Talking about the things they are hearing, seeing or experiencing can be really helpful. These experiences can be very powerful and, if they are locked up inside, it's really hard for a child to work them out. If a child wants to talk about their voices, encourage them to do so. Use gentle and respectful prompts and show that you're interested in what they have to say.

If you're not sure whether they want to talk about them or not – it's ok to ask. If the child is feeling distressed, or the voices get worse when they're being talked about, it can help to focus helping them share how they're feeling rather than talking about the voices themselves. As always, take your lead from the child and stick with what they're comfortable with.

3. Try not to make assumptions

Lots of young people hear voices that others don't, especially in times of stress. Whilst some of these are scary, others are comforting, funny or can act as a guide. So, if someone tells you about their voices try not to assume that it's necessarily a problem for them. Give them the opportunity to tell you about the good bits as well as the bad. It's really helpful to keep an open mind as to what the problem is. It could be the voices, but it could equally be feeling lonely, being bullied or worrying about what people would say if they found out.

4. Reassure/normalise

It's important to let the child know that they're not the only one experiencing this. Around 8% of young people hear voices, even more if you include short term experiences. Hearing voices, in itself, isn't a sign of illness. Around two thirds of people who hear voices do not need support from the mental health services. Struggling to cope with the voices you hear can really knock your confidence, self esteem and make you worry about being 'mad'. Hearing that it's not the end of the world can help.

5. Give hope

Dr Escher's research found that 60% of children and young people stopped hearing voices during their 3 year study. Many more of them found ways of dealing with the voices they continued to hear and were able to get on with their lives. Young people can and do recover and, more importantly, live the life they want to live.

6. Listen to unusual beliefs without judgement

Some young people have unusual ways of explaining their experiences – including aliens, spirits, demons, telepathy, implants or ghosts. Whilst some of these might sound paranoid or strange, it helps to see them in context. They are often an attempt at making sense of an unusual, and sometimes frightening, experience. Others may have roots in cultures that you might not fully understand.

Supporters often worry about saying the wrong thing when young people talk about unusual beliefs like this. As a general guide, it can be really helpful to let the person share what's on their mind – even if it sounds strange. When choosing what to say, it can really help to stick with the feelings rather than getting in to a discussion about the reality of the belief. For the young person who's talking to you, this IS their reality. Only by talking about what they're experiencing can they find creative ways of dealing with it. This doesn't mean you need to pretend you see things the same way just that it helps to accept that this – at the moment – is the way they understand their world.

7. Keep your toolkit handy

If you work with distressed young people, you will already have a toolkit of strategies and skills that you use. This toolkit is equally applicable to young people who are struggling with the voices they hear. If you're feeling that you don't know what to suggest – remember that the young people themselves often come up with the best suggestions. Your role can be to guide them and support them to discover this.

We've found that strategies focussed on the underlying emotions help the best – check our website (www.voicecollective.co.uk) for more ideas around this. Also, strategies that help a young person feel safe are worth their weight in gold. This can include visualisation, creating a safe corner, breathing techniques and grounding techniques).

8. Encourage them to seek support

There are lots of people who can help a young person who is distressed by their voices. Encourage the young person to access these and, if they feel concerned about this, help them talk through their options. Useful organisations include:

- Voice Collective (www.voicecollective.co.uk, 020 7625 9042)
- Young Minds (www.youngminds.org.uk)
- Local CAMHS
- Local voluntary sector counselling services