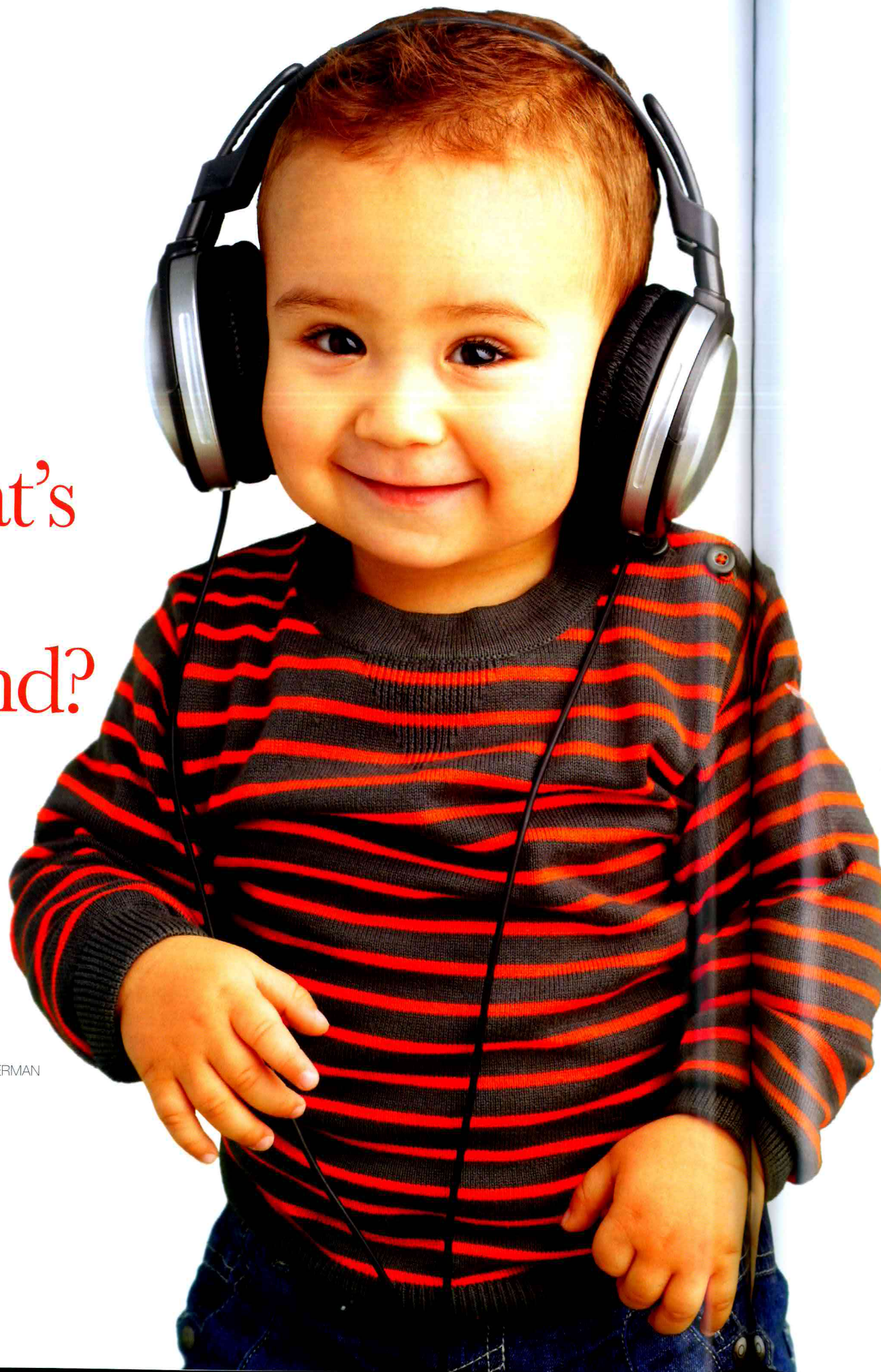


What's that Sound?

Our babies are growing and developing every single day and in this new series, we take a look at their amazing milestones.

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Your baby is wiggling his little toes and fingers. He's even begun to turn over. Pretty soon he'll be on the move and rearing to go. And before you know it, he has sat up on his own, crawled and crossed that long-awaited milestone – taking his first steps.

But while your bub has moved on up from his tummy to his fours and to his two feet, there are a few other milestones he's conquering as well that isn't all that obvious. And what's that you're wondering? It's your little one's hearing. Sure, all our babies are tested at birth but do you know exactly how this very important sense is developed and just how vital it is?

While a person is born with all five senses, hearing is one of the most important ones. "Babies and children learn to speak by listening to other people and mimicking what they hear. So hearing is necessary to develop speech and language skills," says Dr David Lau, a specialist in Ear, Nose, Throat Surgery and consultant at the Raffles ENT Centre.

Say What?

We all know that babies can hear even before they are born. Some mummies-to-be have even said that their babies react to the sound of their voices when they talk or sing to them. However, the most familiar sound to a baby is its mother's heartbeat and that constant familiar sound can calm a crying baby when he's born.

With their hearing developing while they're in the womb, by the time they are born they are able to hear clearly and when he's about a month old, his hearing becomes fully developed. "A newborn can often calm down to soothing voices or startle with loud noises. At two months of age, he may make some cooing sounds. By three months of age, he clearly indicates his response to pleasant sounds and may begin to try and identify the source of sound," says specialist in Paediatrics and consultant from the Raffles Children's Centre, Dr Veronica Toh.

The first three to four years are a remarkable time. That's when your little one will use his hearing to hone his language and behavioural skills. So mum and dads, be careful what you say. Your little one could easily pick it up. Dr Lau adds that this process can continue up to the age of 12.

Spot the Signs

One of the many fears that parents have is that something is wrong with their little one. But when it comes to hearing, how would they know if their baby can't hear. "When the doctor highlighted to me that my baby wasn't meeting the hearing milestones, my first thought was how I could not have noticed it!" remembers Angeline Phua, mum to Liam, aged eight months.

Dr Toh says that the manifestation of hearing loss varies according to the age group. "A new born baby with hearing loss may not startle to loud noises. Older infants may show no reaction when spoken to, especially if the parent is out of the line of vision. Delayed language such as single words by 15 months and simple two worded sentences may also indicate hearing impairment."

While a child who isn't meeting the hearing milestones may indicate a hearing problem, it isn't always necessarily so. "Some babies with perfect hearing don't seem to notice noises around them such as the phone ringing. Some babies may also turn away when you are talking to them. This does not necessarily mean that baby's hearing is affected. It is much more likely that baby simply needs to rest or sleep, after all, all this noise and stimulation can be tiring," says Dr Lau.

Sometimes it could be temporary. If your little one has a cold or ear infection, he could suffer from hearing loss but usually recovers without any lasting effects on your child's hearing.


Take Heed

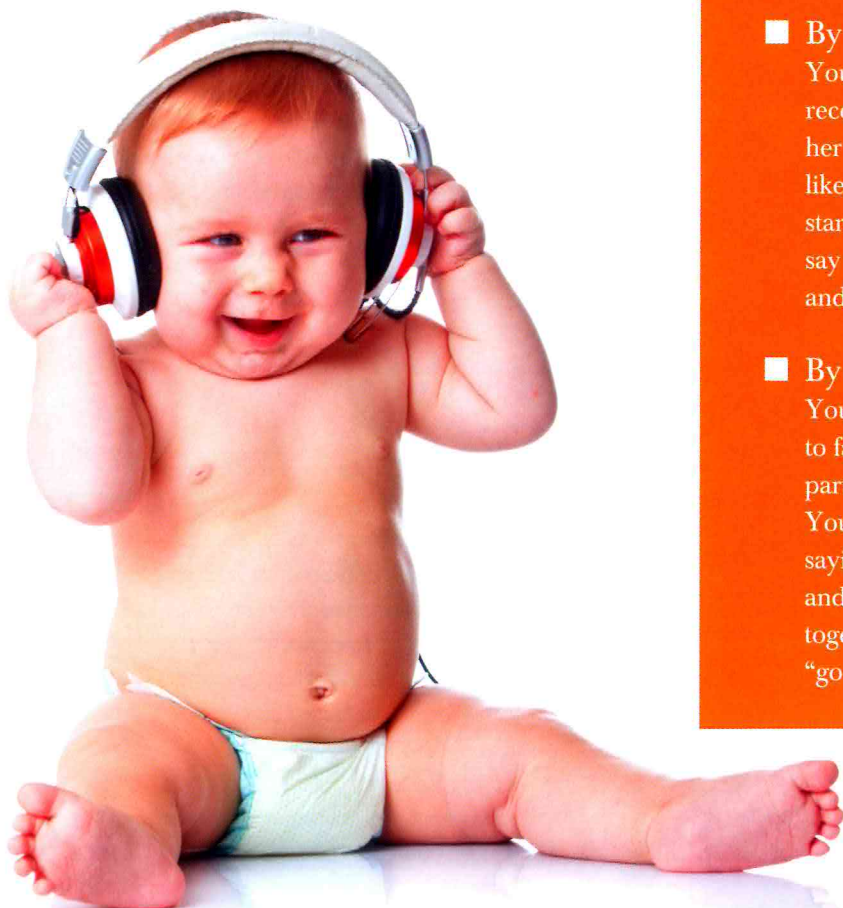
Though the development of hearing cannot be enhanced, Dr Veronica Toh explains how you can avoid the chances of having a child with hearing loss.

- Before planning for pregnancy, women should ensure they have had rubella vaccination.
- Avoid partially cooked meat such as pork, lamb and venison as they can contain a parasite called Toxoplasma. This parasite often infects cats and human contact with infected cat faeces can cause Toxoplasmosis.
- If there is a family history of hearing impairment, the couple should undergo genetic counselling.

But that doesn't mean that you don't need to protect your child's hearing when he arrives. It's a noisy world out there and these loud noises can cause anxiety in your child or worse, damage his hearing. So be sure not to blast that television or radio. However, those aren't the only culprits. Children's toys can also sometimes be very loud. So be careful in your toy choices. If it sounds too loud to you then it's definitely too loud for your young one. As a rule of thumb if you can talk easily over the sound, it should not harm his hearing.

Remember noise-induced hearing loss is preventable and a child with hearing loss can have his speech development affected, which can also lead to difficulties in school. "This can transcribe into delay in overall cognitive learning, frustration, temper tantrums and depression for the child in his very silent world," says Dr Toh.

Nevertheless, not all sounds are bad. If it's quiet and soothing, it can often have a therapeutic effect on an overstimulated child. Sometimes all you need to soothe a fussy baby is a gentle voice or a simple lullaby. But if you are concerned something isn't quite right with your child's hearing, be sure to consult your child's paediatrician or an ear, nose, and throat specialist. 



THE MILESTONES

Dr David Lau tells us what some of a baby's hearing milestones are.

■ At birth

Your baby is paying attention to sounds and voices around him or her and may respond to familiar ones. New born babies may startle when they hear a sharp sound such as a clap.

■ 3 to 6 months

Your baby is starting to gain some head control, and may turn his or her eyes or head towards interesting sounds or familiar voices. As hearing and talking are linked, your baby may also start to make some cooing sounds and other noises.

■ By 1 year

Your baby should start to recognise and respond to his or her own name or common words like "bye-bye", and will probably start trying to imitate words or say simple words like "ma-ma" and "da-da".

■ By 18 months

Your baby may be able to point to familiar objects such as a body part or familiar picture in a book. Your baby will probably start saying more words every month, and start joining some words together such as "mummy book", "go bye-bye".