



Head Banging in Children

Whānau/Family Information

Why some children head bang

Head banging can be upsetting for parents/caregivers to see. In most cases, occasional head banging is a form of self-stimulation, self-comfort, or a way to release frustration.

Whilst some tamariki/children outgrow this behaviour, some may continue to purposefully head bang. Ongoing head banging behaviours can occur in tamariki with neurodiversity or developmental delays and is thought to be related to:

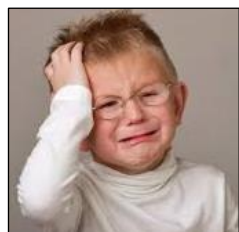
- Physical pain
- Sensory processing differences
- Communication difficulties or frustration

It's important to consider why your tamaiti/child might be headbanging. It can be helpful to keep a diary of when head banging is happening and what is happening before and after head banging is seen (ie. certain noises, times of day, not getting their way, not able to communicate their wants/needs, etc.)

Once you've done this you may want to consider the following.



Head banging due to pain



It might seem unusual to think that your tamaiti engages in head banging behaviour because they are currently in pain. However, banging one's head can serve as a distraction from pain or discomfort they are experiencing elsewhere in their body (eg. ear infection, headaches). This can particularly be the case if the tamaiti has limited language or ability to communicate their pain and ask for help.

If your tamaiti doesn't usually head bang or this is a new behaviour, you should consult with your GP or paediatrician to rule out any injuries that you cannot see or an underlying medical condition, such as an ear infection, toothache or sore throat.

Head banging due to sensory processing differences

Difficulty managing sensory information can be part of why some tamariki head bang. This can occur when tamariki are overloaded with sensory information (too much or overwhelming sensory input) or can happen when tamariki are seeking more feedback from a particular sensory system.

Parents, caregivers or whānau can provide distraction and redirection from head banging when it occurs, and could consider trying the following:

Tamariki who are seeking more sensory information

- A rocking or spinning chair
- A vibrating pillow or toy
- Bouncing on a trampoline
- Swinging on a swing
- Massage or deep pressure activity

Tamariki who need less sensory information

- Noise cancelling headphones
- A quiet space or 'dark den'
- A weighted or heavy blanket
- Reducing lighting by pulling curtains or turning off lights

What works will vary from tamaiti to tamaiti depending on their sensory preferences, you could try writing a list of what your tamaiti finds calming and what they find alerting. Once you've done this you can try redirecting to some of these activities when you see your tamaiti head banging.

Things I find calming

- Hugs from mum/dad
- Trampoline
- Small safe spaces
- Riding my bike

Things I find alerting

- Unexpected loud noises
- Messy play
- Soft touch

If you are unable to redirect your tamaiti, you could try reducing the impact of the head banging by putting a pillow or yoga mats in between them and the item they are banging on.

The Child Development Service has an online learning module around sensory processing if you want to consider some other sensory tools to support your tamaiti – this is available on our website <https://www.cdhb.health.nz/health-services/child-development-service/>

Headbanging due to communication difficulties or frustration

Sometimes tamariki will bang their head when they are seeking attention or feeling frustrated. This could be their way of communicating with you that they want something or that they are upset.

When a tamaiti bangs their head, naturally you go to them to try and stop them from doing so. Some tamariki will understand this and use it as a communication tool, and at times it can become a reliable way of letting an adult know that they need help.

Communication aids or supports such as visuals or key phrases can be useful to support this as they can help tamariki find a different way to communicate their needs.

