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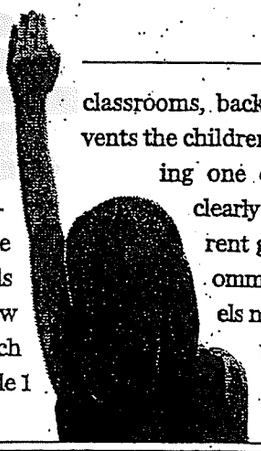
Sometimes the answer to 'are you listening?' is 'I can't'

SHRINK RAP



Psychologists must consider myriad explanations when a child is not performing well at school. New research suggests that the background noise in classrooms could create an obstacle to learning, particularly for younger students. To understand almost all speech that is intended for us, say the experts, the speech must be at least 15 decibels louder than other interfering sounds. New Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network research shows that in typical Grade 1 classrooms, background noise prevents the children from understanding one out of six simple, clearly spoken words. Current guidelines for classrooms recommend that background noise levels not exceed 35 decibels — similar to an almost empty room — for maximum intelligibility of spoken words. Most classrooms exceed this level by 10 times. While in some cases room acoustics are to blame, more often there is too much classroom activity — from students chattering, manipulating classroom equipment and rearranging furnishings. "When difficult listening conditions persist," say the researchers, "some children will 'turn off' and stop trying to understand." Many classrooms used to be havens of monastic silence, with children only speaking when spoken to; they were transformed in the 1970's into "child centred" classrooms with group projects and freedom to "explore." Anyone can be easily distracted from background noise, but the challenges of a noisy classroom are larger for younger (Grade 1) students who require conditions that are seven decibels quieter to understand the same percentage of words as Grade 6 students. *Carol Milstone, PhD, National Post, shrinkrap@nationalpost.com*