

# A Quieter, More Respectful Society

By Arline L. Bronzaft, PhD

**M**y interest in examining the effects of noise on mental and physical health started over 45 years ago when a student in my psychology class, after a lecture on noise, asked if I could help her son and his fellow students whose classrooms in Upper Manhattan were being disrupted by noise from the nearby elevated railroad tracks. This was the start of my research on noise impacts. The principal of the school provided me with reading scores of several classes. When I compared the reading scores of children in classrooms adjacent to the elevated tracks with the reading scores of children on the quiet side of the building, the children exposed to the elevated train noise were nearly a year behind in reading by the sixth grade. This study was published in an academic journal but also received a great deal of publicity in the media and great interest from community residents and public officials.<sup>1</sup> This made it easier for me to contact New York City's Transit Authority and the Board of Education to discuss ways to reduce the noise at the school. The Transit Authority and the Board of Education soon introduced sound abatements to reduce sound levels in the classrooms. After the noise abatements were in place, I returned to the school from my original research and found that children on both sides of the building were now reading at the same level. Reducing classroom noise improved reading scores.<sup>2</sup>

These two studies taught me two things: 1) elevated train noise intruded on classroom learning, and 2) actions can be taken to reduce noise. It also had a real impact on my life in that I focused more and more on noise pollution, conducting research and writing on the effects of noise on our mental and physical health and well-being, but also becoming involved with community groups to lessen noise. Additionally, for over 30 years, I have served on the board of GrowNYC, an organization concerned with environmental issues. I oversee GrowNYC's division addressing noise problems.<sup>3</sup> New Yorkers with noise complaints, can ask my assistance in resolving these complaints. Thus, I have had many years of interaction with people who have been intruded upon by noise and have learned more personally that noise is indeed a hazard to one's health and well-being.

## WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT NOISE?

Since my first study on noise resulted in action that led to the reduction of rail noise in New York City, I believe that ways to reduce noise are accessible. For example, appliances are quieter today than they were earlier; appropriate insulation has resulted in homes being quieter; sound levels of buses and trains have been reduced; and quieter lawn equipment is now available. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), recognizing that aircraft noise intrudes on children's learning, spent millions of dollars to quiet schools subjected to aircraft noise. Yet, despite other efforts by the FAA to lessen noise impacts, residents across the United States are still experiencing much aircraft noise in their homes. Many living in urban settings still experience loud

"souped-up cars" traveling down city streets and parked cars playing music late into the night. Cities are passing noise ordinances to deal with increased noises in their communities but too often residents complain that these ordinances are not being enforced. Thus, we must conclude that much more needs to be done to lessen noise in our environment.

Reflecting on the many calls I get regarding noise complaints, I realized that a large number of them center on inconsiderate behavior, primarily from neighbors. Some of them are calls about neighbors who blast their music too loudly or pound across their wooden, uncarpeted floors early in the morning. There are also complaints about nearby restaurants and bars playing loud music late into the night. I soon realized that there is a critical component that explains such behavior – lack of respect. If people respected their neighbors, would they engage in such "noisy" behavior? Would music be played loudly in the middle of the night if the person playing the music was concerned about its impact on neighbors? How many fewer calls would be made to 311, if the individuals charged with making noise gave some thought to how their neighbors may feel about their loud music? Inflicting your noise on other people is essentially saying you don't care about the adverse effects it may bring about.

## RESPECT

In the noise brochure that GrowNYC distributes<sup>3</sup>, and which I helped produce, there is a section that states: "Quiet Begins With You." One of the suggestions listed is "Respect your neighbor's right to quiet." Respect is a key word when it comes to lessening noise. Indeed, each one of us can contribute personally to making our world less noisy and quieter.

Respect goes beyond person-to-person relationships. Shouldn't government agencies respect citizens? Is the FAA respecting the people who are suffering from overhead flight noise by referring to noise merely as an "annoyance" rather than the health hazard it is? Are our government officials respecting citizens by not funding the EPA's Office of Noise Abatement and Control, which was created to carry out the mandate of the Noise Control Act, with its stated intent to protect human health? Additionally, how respectful are our public officials of laws in general when they ignore the mandate of one law? Are agencies empowered to enforce noise bylaws respectful if they fail to enforce these bylaws?



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**POSITIVE GROWTH**

Fortunately, in the last few years, the number of groups advocating for less noise in our society has grown. Additionally, there have been more articles in the media about noise pollution. The purpose of this editorial is to stress how each one of us must think about noise on a more personal level. Increased noise pollution in our society should be viewed as a statement

about how each of us thinks about our duty to other people. The GrowNYC brochure states that quiet begins with each one of us and less noise can be best accomplished when we respect the right of others to quiet. [HJ](#)

References for this article can be found at <http://bit.ly/HJcurrent>.