

Home / Health

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Children with hearing loss face more bullying

by University of Texas at Dallas

New UT Dallas research indicates that children and adolescents with hearing loss experience higher rates of peer victimization, or bullying, than children with typical hearing.

In the study, approximately 50 percent of the adolescents with hearing loss said they were picked on in at least one way in the past year. Previous studies show about 28 percent of adolescents in the general population report being bullied.

"I thought more [children](#) and adolescents with hearing loss would report getting picked on, but I did not expect the rates to be twice as high as the general population," said Dr. Andrea Warner-Czyz, an assistant professor in the School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences and a researcher at the Callier Center for Communication Disorders.

The study, which appears in the journal *Exceptional Children*, showed the type of bullying experienced by youth and adolescents with hearing loss mimics patterns in children with other special needs, with significantly higher rates of social exclusion.

More than one-fourth of adolescents with hearing loss indicated they felt left out of social activities, compared to only 5 percent of the [general population](#) reporting exclusion. These findings parallel published reports of fewer invitations to social events, lower quantity and quality of friendships, and higher loneliness in children and adolescents with hearing loss.

Researchers conducted an online survey of 87 children and adolescents ages 7 to 18 who wear cochlear implants or [hearing aids](#) for hearing loss. If they indicated they were picked on at all, the survey automatically generated follow-up questions on how often it occurred and why they thought they were targeted.

Approximately 45 percent said they did not know why, 20 percent said it was because of their hearing loss or cochlear implant, and 20 percent said it was because of how they looked or how they acted.

Based on information provided by parents and from other studies, Warner-Czyz said the problems with peers might reflect communication difficulties related to auditory skills.

"Sometimes they miss puns or a play on words, or other cues that have to do with humor. Or when something is said very quietly or in a noisy location, the student with hearing loss might miss it. And that can make them feel like an outcast, or it can make them look like an outcast," she said.

Alternatively, she said peer problems might indicate a broader issue of not recognizing social cues from conversation or distinguishing true friendship from acquaintances.

Researchers have previously said having at least one good friend is a protective factor against bullying. Most children in this study cited several or lots of friends, but anecdotal reports from parents and clinicians questioned the veracity of these [friendships](#).

"Friendships are important to most young people, but I believe they are especially important for children with [hearing loss](#)," said Warner-Czyz. "Anything parents can do to facilitate social interaction and friendship and letting them learn how to be a friend and who is a friend is critical."

She said future research will delve more deeply into the reasons behind differences in friendship quality and [peer victimization](#) in children and adolescents with [hearing loss](#) to guide evidence-based, targeted therapeutic intervention and potentially contribute to effective anti-bullying programs geared toward children with special needs. She said these factors might go beyond individual youth characteristics to include a microsystem of school and home settings.

The research is part of a larger study exploring the quality of life in children and adolescents with [cochlear implants](#).

More information: Andrea D. Warner-Czyz et al. Effect of Hearing Loss on Peer Victimization in School-Age Children, *Exceptional Children* (2018). DOI: [10.1177/0014402918754880](https://doi.org/10.1177/0014402918754880)

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