



Mainstream News

Information about hearing loss for students, families and educators

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Bullying & Hearing Loss: How to Help Children Become More Resilient

"It's important to help your child understand that hurtful remarks and behaviors are not about something that is wrong or bad about them, instead it is the other child that is displaying inappropriate behavior."

"Hey kid, what are those things on your ears?" I sit perched on the park bench as two older boys approach my five-year-old son on the playground. "They're my hearing aids, they help me hear," he shouts back over his shoulder, as he continues to climb the monkey bars, barely missing a stride. The two older boys shrug and head off; I take a deep breath.

As any parent of a child who is deaf or hard of hearing knows reactions to the hearing aids and cochlear implants that our children wear behind their ears can range from curiosity, to gentle teasing, to outright bullying. Bullying is a serious problem in many US schools; it is estimated that 30% of students in grades 6–10 have been involved in some sort of a bullying incident. While there is no specific data attached to the number of children with disabilities who are targeted, research suggests that children with observable disabilities (such as hearing aids and cochlear implants) may be twice as likely to be bullied (Sullivan, 2006).



WHAT IS BULLYING AND HOW DOES IT AFFECT CHILDREN

In her book, *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*, Barbara Coloroso suggests that bullying is not about anger, instead it stems from intolerance towards differences. Ms. Coloroso states that it can be hard to draw the line between ordinary meanness and bullying, not every incident or unkind remark is bullying. It's important to help your child understand that hurtful remarks and behaviors are not about something that is wrong or bad about them, instead it is the other child that is displaying inappropriate behavior.

Children need to be taken seriously when they talk about behavior or words used by other children that hurt them. However, getting your child to talk about bullying can be difficult, especially as they get older. The reasons for children not wanting to talk about bullying range from being ashamed of the situation, to thinking that no one, not even an adult, will be able to help them. "Children usually give us clues. We just need to be tuned into them," says Ms. Coloroso. "If your gut says it's happening it probably is."

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October is National Bullying Awareness month and we wanted to put together a newsletter that addressed the issue of bullying. Bullying is one of those behaviors that we are all aware of, but that no one likes to talk about. But, it's important that we start this conversation early with our children and that we keep talking to them as they grow older. We also need to talk to each other. Schools and communities need to come together so that students know they are safe both at school and at home. We hope this newsletter helps to raise awareness of what teachers, parents and students can do together to help prevent bullying and that by sharing a personal story of bullying we are better able to recognize and respond when a bullying situation arises.

“Some children have a naturally strong sense of self and are extremely resilient in the face of unkind remarks,” says Dr. Jennifer Reesman, Director, DREAM (Deafness-Related Evaluations and More) Clinic in Baltimore, Maryland. “At young ages they have this attitude about their hearing loss of “This is who I am. I’m okay. If you don’t like it you can leave it.” However, not all children have this built in self-assurance. Dr. Reesman, and other experts, suggest that parents take time to equip their child with coping skills and to make sure they have a plan to deal with bullying situations before they occur. This preparation can help your child deal with unkind remarks and behaviors so they know how to react when stung with an upsetting feeling.

BULIDING RESILIENCY

What is your attitude?

Parental feelings and emotions about hearing loss can be a huge factor in the development of a child’s self-image and how he or she feels about their abilities.

If parents are conflicted about their child’s hearing loss and unsure of how to react to it, the child can pick up on those feelings and internalize the idea that there is something wrong with them; that they are not complete because they need to wear a cochlear implant or a hearing aid.

On the other hand if a child feels they are perfect just the way they are, then they will be better able to internalize these feelings and when someone does call them a name or puts them down they are better able to roll with it because they know the problem lies with the person doing the name-calling rather than with themselves.

What is a friend?

The friendship world can be tricky to navigate. Some children have a difficult time distinguishing between supportive relationships and relationships that have a different motive. “Children want to fit in, they want to be part of a group,” says Dr. Reesman, “often times I hear of situations where the child will go along with a group that is really making fun of him, because he doesn’t realize the difference.”

Dr. Reesman suggests that families talk about friendship at home. “This shared, open communication is important in building resiliency in your child,” says Dr. Reesman. “Start at an early age, and discuss the idea of friendship. Help your child understand the difference between what friends do and what friends don’t do. Find out who your child’s friends are, invite them over to your house, stay connected with how they talk and play together.”

It’s important to remember that friends and family members often tease one another good-naturedly. The difference between friendly and unfriendly teasing has to do with the cues that surround the words—tone of voice, body posture and facial expressions. All those social cues that children who are deaf or hard of hearing often have a difficult time picking up on. Role-play can help—say phrases in a friendly voice and a mean voice—have them distinguish between the two and also have them practice what they could do in response.

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SIGNS OF BULLYING

- Refusal to go to school, or sudden lack of interest in school
- Change in grades
- No longer shows interest in family or school activities
- Appears sad or angry after a phone call/text message/ or email
- Does or says something that is out of character for your child.

Build those language skills.

Language can be an area of weakness for children who are deaf or hard of hearing so provide them with the words that help explain their hearing loss to others. Make sure they understand their equipment and what it does to help them hear. Also, teaching them a few key phrases, such as “That isn’t a very nice thing to say,” or “Oh, that is very interesting,” to use in response to bullying situations can go a long way in helping any child become more confident.

Dr. Reesman suggests keeping the responses simple and age appropriate. Make sure they can answer questions about their hearing loss; how their hearing aids or processors help them hear; what their FM system does. Help them build these skills at home and at school so they become really comfortable with their explanation.

Build friendship skills.

Research shows that children who are bullied typically have inadequate social skills (Olewus, 1993). “The difficulty with this,” says Lois Heymann, director of the Steven and Shelly Einhorn Communication Center at the Center for Hearing and Communication in New York City, “is that well-developed listening skills are really what form the basis of well-developed social skill, which is something that children who are deaf and hard of hearing need some extra practice with.”

Hearing loss can reduce the number of opportunities that children may have for incidental learning of social information, where they “overhear” their friends and teachers negotiating in social spaces. This gap in knowledge can increase their vulnerability. Help them practice taking turns in a conversation; asking questions about others; how to advocate for themselves when they have difficulties following conversations; and how to make “small talk” with others, complimenting them on what they are wearing, or how they play a particular sport.

It can also be difficult for children who are deaf or hard of hearing to read the expressions of others and they also might be unaware of the signals they are sending with their own body language. For example,

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Unfortunately, as parents we cannot protect or prevent our children from having to deal with hurtful situations. But what we can do is make sure that they are aware that these situations may occur and that they are prepared to deal with them. Do give your child some space to solve their own problems so they are able to test and develop their skills, but also remain vigilant and aware of changes in your child’s emotions and behavior.

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Helping children feel secure in their abilities and in what they have to contribute to a group can go towards helping them become more resilient.



approaching a new group is easier when you smile, or how to show excitement when you are asked to join a game. Or he might not know how to show that he likes someone so he comes across as awkward or unsure. Again, practice these skills at home and at school. Have them make faces that mirror the way they are feeling (happy, sad, excited). Also practice body language skills—“How could you approach a group and look friendly?”

Build “social currency.”

Dr. Horowitz, parenting coach and author of *Family Centered Parenting*, describes this as “where a child stands in relation to others within their community, all those unwritten rules that are part of schoolyard life.” Helping children feel secure in their abilities and in what they have to contribute to a group can go towards helping them become more resilient. “Everybody has something they are good at,” continues Dr. Horowitz.

Often times these skills stand out naturally, a child might be a natural athlete or a gifted artist. However, developing a healthy sense of accomplishment doesn’t only come from huge accomplishments. Developing a passion in activities as diverse as origami, Lego design or rock climbing are ways for children to find success that can lead to success in social situations.

“It’s really about helping children understand that their hearing loss doesn’t define them,” says one mother, whose daughter wears bilateral hearing aids, “My daughter’s hearing loss is only such a small part of who she is. She is an

accomplished dancer, soccer player and an animal lover. If someone is making fun of her, I tell her, they are not really taking the time to get to know what a great person she is.”

Make connections.

Be conscious of the friendships and connections that children have. In some ways this can be the best defense against bullying. “If your child feels connected and valued in one group of friends they will be less vulnerable to mistreatment in another location,” says Dr. Reesman.

Have your child connect with children who have typical hearing, as well as children with hearing loss; children who live in the same neighborhood and children from different areas. Look for opportunities for children to develop friendships outside of school through different groups, activities and teams, whether it’s a sports team, art class or dance troupe.

Make a plan.

Spend time talking about bullying and working on creating a plan together. Research shows that children who reported and discussed bullying and teasing with an adult were better able to deal with the hurtful behavior than those who didn’t (Davis & Nixon, 2009).

“Family meetings can be a great place for children to gain practice and confidence before problems occur,” suggest Dr. Horowitz, “Families can practice different responses to use in a situation and also how to approach an adult for help.”

“One thing that works for us,” says Christina Danese, mother of a son with bilateral implants and the Development Associate at Clarke School New York, “is we give the other child three chances. If the remarks or behaviors continue, then my son goes to an adult, whether that is myself, a teacher or other adult at the school. This way my son has an opportunity to solve the problem, but he also knows that adults will help if needed.”

Additionally, Dr. Reesman stresses the importance of having a safe person that a child can go to for help. “Many adults are unsure of how to respond to bullying behavior and may try to brush it off as a normal part of childhood.” Designate an adult either at school (teacher, coach, therapist or administrator) that will listen to your child no matter what and will take their concerns seriously. It can make a huge difference in the life of a child if they know they have someone they can talk with and go to for help.

“It’s really about helping children understand that their hearing loss doesn’t define them.”

RESOURCES

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Action Plan If You’re Being Bullied

1. Leave the situation. Try to do this before things escalate.
2. Make sure you have an adult that you can confide in and who will listen to you, no matter what. If you believe you are being bullied it’s important you talk about it, not keep it to yourself.
3. Respond directly to the bully. Be assertive and confident. Keep voice calm and steady.
4. Ask for help. If you see someone you know call them by name. If no one you know is close by ask whoever is standing close.
5. One method to help defuse the situation is called “fogging.” This is when you respond with either neutral or affirmative statements that won’t escalate the situation. Try things like, “maybe,” “that’s your opinion” or “whatever.” This can help create extra time until you can get to a safe spot or a safe person.
6. If you do decided to respond to the bully take time and practice. Be assertive and confident but not aggressive. Keep voice calm and maintain eye contact.



When Your Child is Being Bullied:

Most schools have some sort of policy against bullying, but somehow it still manages to slip through the cracks. It is heartbreaking when it happens. Here is one family's experience and how they continue to respond to bullying in the life of their child.

We had many experiences with and still have a lot of concerns about bullying. For our son, in middle school the bullying was more overt, hostile and even became physical. In high school, while more subtle, bullying is equally concerning and focuses on exclusion. While the bullies are fewer in number in high school, they seem to be very skilled at finding and exposing weaknesses as well as mocking and undermining sources of pride.

The bullying started in 6th grade, when our son started at a private school that we chose for its small class sizes. At his previous school, W was known as one of the more high-achieving students. However, in this new environment, some students mocked him for asking "what?" and assumed he was not very bright. This inaccurate assumption was reinforced by a teacher who was charged with overseeing his technology and his transition into the school. The teacher, through words and actions, indicated that W was different and needed to be treated differently - an "instruction" with which some students readily complied. I believe this set the stage for a rocky year by allowing the students to feel that W was of lesser value, and empowering them "to put W in his place" whenever they saw fit.

The bullying started out as "typical" boy trash-talking and became more enthusiastic and sustained as they found they could use his hearing loss as an additional weapon against him. When we brought this up to a school counselor, some concern was expressed but there was also a definite "boys will be boys" undertone

When you are deaf, you need to be invited in—you are easy to exclude. You need to be actively included.

coupled with an overprotective mother diagnosis in their response.

One day, during Physical Education, our son collided with a student and fell to the floor. He stayed down to check that his CI devices were still on. Another student stood over him and W thought that he came over to offer a helping hand. Instead the student pointed his finger very close to W's face and loudly exclaimed, "You're handicapped!!" This moment provided actual evidence that the bullying was beyond typical boy trash talking.

Later that day, our son experienced another attack that actually turned physical. It was only then and through our intervention that the school intervened. The middle school principal talked to all boys involved. The ones who admitted their role faced some minor consequences. The ones who admitted nothing, as far as we know, faced no consequences. Following these episodes, a new teacher was given the role of W's advocate.

After being called "handicapped," and experiencing physical altercations, our son put on a strong façade, but started wearing a hooded sweatshirt to school for the



next 7 months—making sure the hood covered his head (and his CI devices), rain or shine. We asked W if he wanted to leave the school, but he said he did not want to be "a quitter"—to which we replied that leaving a bad situation and finding a better place is not quitting.

One Family's Experience

WHERE WE ARE NOW

Years have passed, and things have gotten much better. Our son is now in high school at the same school and is one of the top students taking a challenging course load and participating in sports and other activities. But it took time and a lot of personal fortitude to dig out from the damage that had been done back in 6th grade. For example, it was hard to shake the label of being “lesser than,” but he persevered, proving himself on a daily basis and eventually most students have come to see him for who he is—a smart, funny, athletic kid who is also deaf. We closely monitor his self-esteem. We also have a deal with him that he share with us any instances of bullying as soon as they occur. He has developed a few strong friendships and a fairly broad group of acquaintances. I think Clarke summer camp helped him quite a bit during this “rebuilding period” to learn how to develop strong and true friendships and to realize that he is not alone.

We mainly try to reinforce that it is not his fault, that the bullies are wrong and that an adult needs to know as soon as possible when he needs help. We let him know that he is the most important person in the world to us and that we will always love and support him. We made a deal with him that he needs to tell us sooner when things like this happen again. We reinforced the fact that we are a team. We also got him some counselling so that he could talk to a skilled adult who could provide a more objective perspective and a new source of support. When these instances of bullying came up, we immediately assured him that he did nothing wrong. I joined every volunteer committee and activity at school that I could – if W was not going to leave the school then I was going to make sure that the school

knew I too was going nowhere, and in fact, that I would be everywhere.

We try to talk through scenarios with him and provide guidance to preempt bullying situations because there are still some kids who want to “put him in his place.” We also practice quick, terse responses to bullying language and ways to get out of difficult circumstances.

There are still kids who are unkind, there always will be. For example, there's the boy who refused to repeat for W when our son asked him to. W countered by saying that he had a right to hear just like

later in life when they face their first true adverse situation—how will they fare when they have not developed the tools to manage adversity? W, on the other hand, we like to remind him, has developed the maturity and strength of character to put things into perspective and the grace and internal fortitude to handle whatever comes his way.

What I learned as a parent of a child who is deaf is that you can do everything for your child to the best of your ability: providing a loving and supportive home, assembling a team of experts to help,

When these instances of bullying came up, we immediately assured him that he did nothing wrong.

everyone else. The boy replied, “I have a first amendment right not to tell you.” This reminded me of something I read by Dr. Philip Zazove, who is deaf and a Professor and Chair of the Department of Family Medicine at the University of Michigan. While I cannot cite the source or confirm that it is a direct quote, it went something like this: When you are deaf, you need to be invited in—you are easy to exclude. You need to be actively included. He is right. That made us realize that others have a lot of power over our son's experiences. Bullies seem to hone in on and take advantage of this power to exclude.

We often remind W that one of his greatest strengths and attributes is his grit. The kids who have bullied him are the ones to whom things have come pretty easily so far. But they will have challenges

obtaining speech and language support, choosing the right technology, and carefully evaluating every decision you have to make in hope of making the best choice. Together with a team of experts and professionals, we work so hard to help our child develop the self-advocacy skills he will need throughout life to navigate the world as a person with hearing loss. And this effort can be undone by a few 11 year old boys who come along and undermine with amazing speed and efficiency a key pillar of our hard work. Bullying is destructive and so harmful with lasting effects. I will not romanticize it by saying our son is stronger for it. I wish it had never happened. But he has weathered what we hope is the worst of the storm and has the tools and experience to deal with more challenges in the future.



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Clarke Schools for Hearing and Speech
provides children who are deaf or hard of hearing with the listening, learning and spoken language skills they need to succeed.

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Did you know ...

Clarke Mainstream Services has a blog **Hear Me Out**

written for itinerant teachers and other professionals working with students who are deaf or hard of hearing? Heather Stinson an experienced itinerant teacher of the deaf shares stories and information from on the job!

Visit us at <http://clarkemainstream.blogspot.com>



Clarke Mainstream Services has a **two-week residential camp**

each July for students 9-17 years old? You can meet some of our campers at

<https://www.clarkeschools.org/summeradventure>

The dates for 2019 are **July 7 - July 19**. Information posted soon on our website, www.clarkeschools.org or call **413-582-1121** for more information!