

Study: Abuse rates higher among deaf and hard-of-hearing children compared with hearing youths

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A new study at Rochester Institute of Technology indicates that the incidence of maltreatment, including neglect and physical and sexual abuse, is more than 25 percent higher among deaf and hard-of-hearing children than among hearing youths. The research also shows a direct correlation between childhood maltreatment and higher rates of negative cognition, depression and post-traumatic stress in adulthood.

The study, which was presented at the 2010 annual meeting of the Association of Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies, is one of the first to compare childhood maltreatment between deaf and hearing children.

"By providing clear data on the high rate of childhood maltreatment in the deaf community, we hope to shine a light on the issue and provide mental-health professionals with the necessary data to better treat both children and adults suffering from mental and behavioral disorders," notes Lindsay Schenkel, assistant professor of psychology at RIT and director of the research team.

The group, which also included undergraduate psychology student Danielle Burnash and Gail Rothman-Marshall, associate professor of liberal studies at RIT's National Technical Institute for the Deaf, conducted a survey of 425 college students, 317 hearing and 108 deaf, asking them to describe any maltreatment they had experienced prior to the age of 16.

Seventy-seven percent of deaf and hard-of-hearing respondents indicated experiencing some form of child maltreatment, compared with 49 percent among hearing respondents. In addition, respondents with more severe [hearing loss](#) indicated an increased rate and severity of maltreatment.

"Interestingly, having a deaf parent or a family member who signs, or being part of the deaf community, did not reduce the risk of [childhood maltreatment](#)," Burnash notes.

The team also found that deaf and hard-of-hearing respondents who had suffered maltreatment had higher rates of negative cognitions about themselves, others and the future compared with hearing individuals who had suffered maltreatment. The rate of depression and post-traumatic stress was also higher among all deaf and hard-of-hearing respondents regardless of maltreatment.

Schenkel, Rothman-Marshall and Burnash plan to continue to examine the issue of child maltreatment in deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals and the impact this has on mental-health functioning with the goal of developing standardized assessments and more effective treatments for this population.

"For example, our research shows that individuals who are active members of the deaf community report fewer depressive and post-traumatic stress symptoms," Schenkel adds.

Provided by Rochester Institute of Technology

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