

# It's common for children to report hearing voices, researchers say

June 14 2017, by Sarah Parry And Filippo Varese

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Although the way we view and support people with mental health difficulties has improved over the years, experiences such as hearing voices and seeing visions are often still associated with "severe and

enduring mental illness". But what is less well-known about these [voices and visions](#) is that they are surprisingly common – especially when growing up.

Around [8 percent of young people are thought to hear voices](#) at some stage in childhood, with up to 75 percent having a one-off experience of voice hearing. This makes hearing voices about as common for [young people](#) as having [asthma](#) or [dyslexia](#). For many children, then, it seems that hearing voices is [a pretty normal part of growing up](#).

Research shows, the experience of hearing voices that others can't hear – also called auditory verbal hallucinations in traditional psychiatric terms – is not usually upsetting for many children. The experience of hearing voices also [doesn't tend to last too long](#) – meaning it can often be something children grow out of or overcome in time.

Nevertheless, for some young people, the experience can carry on for many years and cause confusion and distress – not only for the young person but for the family as a whole.

## Learning from young people

Compared to adult [voice](#)-hearers, relatively little research or analysis has been carried out with young people who hear voices. Consequently, we don't really know much about how young people make sense of these experiences or how they might look for help.

This is one of the main reasons why we have recently set up the [Young Voices Study](#). Over recent months, we have been [working with young people](#) and their families to explore their views on what it's actually like to hear voices in childhood and how parents can support their children through the experiences.

As well as speaking with young people and their parents or guardians in the northwest of England, we have also developed two online surveys that can be accessed internationally – one for [young people who hear voices](#) and one for their [parents or guardians](#).

Although we are at an early stage of the research, the stories we have heard so far have offered useful insights into the complexity of these experiences.

Young people and their parents have described a huge range of experiences. Some young people have explained how their voices can be supportive, but also intrusive and distressing. We have also heard about a range of factors that make the voices helpful, comforting or problematic, as well as young people's ideas about the support that would be helpful for others going through the same thing.

## Behind the label

[Research with teenagers who hear voices](#) suggests that the ways young people make sense of their voices plays a crucial role in associated distress. So someone who considers hearing voices as a sign of "madness", or as an uncontrollable power that can force them to take actions against their will, is likely to experience considerable distress. As such, they may try to "control" the experiences through either self-injury or substance use – both of which are unhelpful in the long-term.

But if people can take a "curious" and "accepting" view of their voices, many young people find that their voices can become [a useful source of support](#) to help with other difficulties in life. As one of our participants said:

[The voices] help me with problems I'm having and have actually helped me in school as well .

Our early data also highlights the importance of families' reactions to the experience of hearing voices. This is because the reaction of parents is likely to influence how young people feel about their voices.

For instance, one young person who responded to our online survey explained how reactions from the adults around him not only upset and worried him, but also unsettled the voices. He said:

No one would believe me and it would frighten them [the voices].

And it is information such as this that can help us to understand the different layers of these experiences. These stories can also help us as researchers and clinicians to better comprehend the factors that can lead some children to become frightened or distressed when confronted with experiences that are not readily discussed or met with acceptance.

## **Voicing needs and difficulties**

These personal stories from young people and their families also offer a unique opportunity to explore the extraordinary ways children cope with challenges.

[Research](#) has shown that hearing voices can begin for a range of reasons, including after an operation or an acute fever – or in response to emotional distress. Voice-hearing can also be [triggered by traumas](#), such as bullying, loneliness, the loss of a loved one, abuse or neglect.

Our research builds on this and shows that while hearing voices can be a source of concern, it can also be a valuable coping strategy for some children. Indeed, one of our participants highlighted that his voices are "actually pretty cool".

We also hope that our research will help to increase awareness and

reduce social stigma around these experiences. This will mean young people who hear voices can be better supported and also encouraged to talk about their experiences more freely and without fear or shame.

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