

a researcher looks back

FIRST PERSON

By Peter S. Steyger

I realize now that denial of one's deafness or hearing loss is a recipe for setting up situations where bullying can occur.

Peter S. Steyger, Ph.D., a researcher with the Oregon Hearing Research Center, in Portland, lost his hearing at 14 months old due to meningitis and streptomycin, an ototoxic aminoglycoside antibiotic treatment. Born and raised in Stockport, England, Steyger came to the United States after completing his Ph.D. on the effects of ototoxic drugs on cochlear sensory hair cells. He is now developing therapeutic intervention methods that block the uptake of ototoxic drugs by sensory hair cells to preserve hearing.



Above and right: Portrait of Peter Steyger in 1973 and now in his laboratory.

In high school, I was bullied constantly. The bullying centered on the fact that I could not easily articulate new multi-syllable words or participate in casual conversations with other boys. It was exacerbated after the death of my father when I was 12. In addition, because of the financial and emotional destabilization his death brought to my until-then supportive family, I no longer recounted incidents at school. I felt I had to be strong for my mother as she adjusted to a rapidly changing family environment. This self-imposed stoicism and resulting lack of familial awareness enabled the bullying to be perpetuated and shook my innate sense of self-worth.

With my parents and four older siblings who were hearing, I was fairly gregarious between the ages of 4-8, and I had several close friends, hearing, the same age. I was the only deaf student in a private school with small classes. My English elocution was fairly good as a result of many hours of daily speech therapy and training between the ages of 3-6. It was a happy time.

Between the ages of 8-11, however, I became aware of my hearing loss as it began to negatively affect my interactions with classmates and teachers. At this age, kids begin telling each other jokes, with punchlines that arrive thick and fast. By not laughing at the first iteration of a punchline, I began to receive retaliatory silences when I attempted to tell jokes, and I was puzzled why jokes that others told were funny but not when I recited them.

At 11 years old, I started high school. Now there were 90 kids in each grade, the majority of whom I had never met before. Bullying occurred in a variety of forms, but it was predominantly verbal. Physical abuse or challenges would only occur after incidents of verbal teasing, imitation, and intimidation.

Hearing and pronouncing new words was always, and remains to this day, difficult, unless I see the words written out. German, taught in class, was particularly difficult. I would repeat the long German words, with their often invisible sounds, and my classmates would mimick my pronunciation and howl with laughter. I was given a German nickname, *gebraten Hubn*, which means *fried chicken*, a phrase I could never say right. The name remained with me until I left the school five years later.

The teachers were reluctant to acknowledge and act on the verbal bullying taking place under their noses and did not respond as long as there was no fighting. Occasionally, I was punished for defending





myself by the very people whose job was to ensure a safe school environment. When I tried to talk with them, I was told to rise above the bullying or to ignore it. Only once, in tears, was I asked by a teacher to describe why I was upset. Then I faltered and refused because it conflicted with the unwritten rule of not telling on your classmates. In my experience, the only way to gain space and respect was to stand up to bullies. This worked with individual bullies, but not with those who worked as a group.

Looking Back

I see that bullying had several major effects:

- I became more isolated in society and far less confident in my abilities.
- I became afraid to ask questions of teachers, colleagues, authoritarian figures, or relatives.
- I did not challenge assumptions or the status quo.

Looking Forward

It has only been recently, with my own 12-year-old daughter in school, that I can appreciate just how vulnerable I was as a young boy. It is extremely important for teenagers who are deaf or hard of hearing to have positive images of their own self-worth, high self-esteem, and an identity that incorporates their hearing loss. I realize now that denial of one's deafness or hearing loss is a recipe for setting up situations where bullying can occur.

For many deaf individuals, talking about feelings that surround hearing loss is a first important step to developing a positive sense of self-worth and a strong identity. For me, this process occurred through interacting with both peers and role models who have already successfully developed a strong sense of identity. I joined Self Help for Hard of Hearing People, the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and became aware of the National Association of the Deaf.

The fun comes in actively sharing memories—an activity that helps one develop a strong identity. Recently, several deaf adults and I were discussing our childhood, and one person spoke of how silly she felt after diving into the swimming pool with her hearing aids on. Each of us smiled and laughed out loud. Every one of us had done exactly the same thing. Such shared feelings are heart-warming, self-affirming, and truly priceless.

These experiences are vital for teenagers, especially for deaf and hard of hearing teenagers in mainstream schools who are under enormous peer pressure to be like those around them. I had the opportunity to participate in a workshop by Sam Trychin, a hard of hearing audiologist, for 15 hard of hearing teens

who, upon arrival, were not at all gregarious. After 2-3 hours of audience participation, the teens were actively asking each other about their assistive listening devices—FM, infra-red, BTE hearing aids, cochlear implants. By the time the pizza arrived, they were no longer inhibited by hearing loss and having so much fun they were making happy noise. These teens were crying when it was time to leave and vowing to keep in touch.

Fortunately, and largely because of my contacts with other deaf professionals who became role models and mentors, I have grown to accept my hearing loss as an essential part of my identity. I am proud of it and wear multi-colored ear molds to demonstrate my pride. My hearing aids also serve to introduce my hearing loss in a relaxed and natural manner to new people, who today are far more aware, tolerant, and accommodating. I now channel energy previously wasted in trying to hide my hearing loss to positive strategies for interacting successfully.

Still, knowing that there is a community of like-minded deaf individuals out in the world has been an extremely bittersweet experience for me because I only developed my identity and self-worth in the last eight years. For 33 years I struggled to hide my hearing loss and tried to be a “hearing” person. This long-term isolation from other deaf and hard of hearing individuals still saddens me today.

It is my hope that those reading this article will endeavor to enable deaf and hard of hearing teens to find like-minded peers and positive role models. These kinds of connections not only forestall bullying by classmates but also enable each teen to develop his or her academic and social potential to the fullest.

Peer and Mentor Networking Groups

Local chapters can be found at the following websites. If there is not a local chapter, join the national organization and form one or participate in their on-line communities/e-mail lists:

- **National Association of the Deaf** – <http://www.nad.org>
- **Self Help for Hard of Hearing People** – <http://www.hearingloss.org>
- **Association of Late-Deafened Adults** – <http://www.alda.org>
- **Alexander Graham Bell Assoc. for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing** – <http://www.agbell.org>