

Hearing loss becoming more prevalent

Studies show the problem is being left untreated and could have a serious impact on a young person's ability to learn.

FOR THE DAILY COURIER

For many years, hearing loss has been considered either an occupational hazard or a natural occurrence of growing old. But as recent studies indicate, and local hearing experts confirm, hearing loss is becoming more and more prevalent in younger demographics, and many children are not getting the treatment they need.

"I don't think there is any question that we are seeing more and more young people — from children to young adults — come in looking for hearing screening," said Rebecca Younk, audiologist for Amplifon USA.

Younk believes there could be several factors involved but cites noise exposure as one of the biggest threats.

Personal entertainment devices, cell phones and exposure to higher decibels of ambient noise are having an impact on hearing loss.

A recent Johns Hopkins University study argued that hearing loss nationwide was more widespread than previously believed, with an estimated 55 million Americans having hearing loss in one or both ears, with men, whites and the least-educated most affected. The study estimated that 8.5 percent of people age 20-29 have some level of hearing loss.

Studies are also showing that the problem is being left untreated and it could have a serious impact on a young person's ability to learn. The Better Hearing Institute also released a study earlier this year that states that nearly 1.5 million young peo-

ple under the age of 21 have hearing loss that could be helped by amplification.

"Children need to be able to hear, not just in the classroom, but also because hearing affects language competence, cognitive development, social and emotional well-being, and academic achievement," said Sergei Kochkin, executive director of BHI. "Children who cannot hear well — that is, when their hearing loss is untreated or under-treated — could face a life of underperformance and broken dreams."

A large part of the problem is that many parents today either don't recognize their child's hearing problem, minimize it, or have been given misinformation regarding the ability to treat the child's hearing loss. In fact, at least 50 percent of parents don't go back for detailed testing when their infant fails an initial hearing screening.

"I think it's critical that parents take their children for regular hearing screening, particularly with the level of impact we're seeing with the use of headphones and other devices," Younk said.

Key findings from the BHI study include:

■ Only 12 percent of children under the age of 18 with hearing loss use hearing aids; yet an estimated 1.5 million youth (including adult dependents) under the age of 21 have hearing loss that may be improved with amplification.

■ The study found minimal evidence of the use of any form of hearing assistance in the classroom (e.g., FM systems, hearing aids, speakers), other than front-row seating.

■ Hearing loss leaves children vulnerable to other problems, according to three out of four parents of children with hearing loss. Common problem areas include:

- Social skills (52 percent)
- Speech and language devel-

opment (51 percent)

— Grades in school (50 percent)

— Emotional health (42 percent)

— Relationships with peers (38 percent)

— Self-esteem (37 percent)

— Relationships with family (36 percent)

■ Three in 10 parents (32 percent) cite embarrassment or other social stigma issues as a reason their child does not use a hearing aid.

■ One out of five (22 percent) parents says they are unable to afford hearing devices.

■ Four in 10 parents were told that their child did not need amplification because they had hearing loss in only one ear.

■ Two in 10 parents were mistakenly told that their child could not be helped because they had high frequency hearing loss. Another 20 percent were told they could not be helped because they had a low-frequency hearing loss.

Key educational and public policy questions raised by the study include the following:

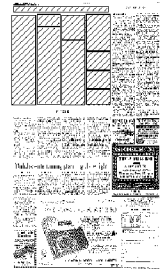
■ Do educators, medical doctors, and hearing healthcare professionals underestimate the impact of mild and unilateral hearing loss in children?

■ Are pediatricians sufficiently trained to measure hearing loss and advise parents of treatment options?

■ Is the prevalence of treatable hearing loss among children under-represented in the United States when subjective methodology (e.g., parental awareness) is used to assess hearing loss?

■ Do parents have viable options for paying for hearing aids for their children if they can't personally afford them?

■ Why are only a minority of children in America with hearing loss recipients of amplification, and what can be done in the medical and hearing health profession to make sure that all chil-



dren receive adequate help for their hearing loss?

■ Are too many young people in America being left behind because they don't fit existing models of hearing disability?

Younk said one source of hearing help for children of families whose incomes are significantly limited and who are unable to afford the costs of quality hearing

instruments is the Miracle-Ear Children's Foundation. Miracle-Ear is a nationwide retailer of high quality hearing aid products.

For more information on Miracle-Ear, or how they can help your children with hearing loss, call: Carla Knapp of Miracle-Ear Center of Uniontown at 724-439-8900, Miracle-Ear Service Center

of Connellsville at 724-439-8900, Miracle-Ear Service Center of Fairchance at 304-842-3050, Miracle-Ear Service Center of Farmington at 724-439-8900, Miracle-Ear Service Center of Perryopolis at 724-439-8900, Miracle-Ear Service Center of Smithfield at 724-439-8900 and Miracle-