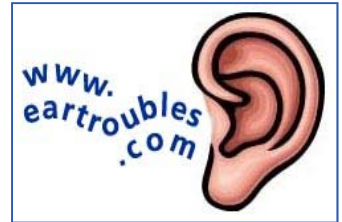


Poor School Attendance and Conductive Hearing Loss

by Dr Damien Howard



Poor school attendance is a major issue in the limited outcomes for Indigenous students.

A number of factors contribute to poor school attendance, one of which is Conductive Hearing Loss. Indigenous children experience massive levels of middle ear disease and associated Conductive Hearing Loss.

It is estimated that Indigenous children in Australia experience middle ear disease on average for 2.6 years during their childhood compared to an average of 3 months for non-Indigenous children. The communication, social and learning problems associated with Conductive Hearing Loss contribute to children avoiding school.

In one study carried out in remote schools it was found that Indigenous children who experienced persistent middle ear disease attended school significantly less than those who did

not. The West Australian Child Health Study also found poor social and emotional outcomes among children with serious middle ear disease. My work points to children with Conductive Hearing Loss avoiding school when they experience high levels of frustration, stress and anxiety.

Children with hearing loss experience more frustration and anxiety, especially when listening in noisy environments. As children progress through school, learning becomes increasingly dependent on children's listening and literacy skills.

Children with listening problems also have literacy problems because of their difficulties developing the phonics skills that are important in learning to read. Stress, anxiety and frustration are a common experience when children have poor listening and literacy skills in schools where there are high levels of background noise








and in buildings that have poor acoustics.

These adverse social and emotional experiences are usually invisible to others. Because children with listening problems have to work harder to follow what is said they often tire quickly or don't cope.

It is not only in classrooms that children with listening problems face difficulties. Playground noise levels can often inhibit their participation in the games and social interaction. They may feel that they are being excluded, or that others don't want to play with them.

Overall these communication difficulties in and out of the classroom lead to behavioural problems, poor school performance, shyness, reluctance to participate and avoidance of school through non attendance.

Schools can do a number of things to minimise children with listening difficulties experiencing frustration, anxiety and stress. Schools can:

-  Identify students who are likely to have a hearing loss through games like Blind Man's Simon Says ([see www.eartroubles.com](http://www.eartroubles.com)).
-  Lower class sizes when many students have Conductive Hearing Loss.
-  Involve more Indigenous adults to provide in-class support.
-  Teachers can manage the listening demands in their classrooms by:
 - teaching in ways that support the visual learning styles usually preferred by children with Conductive Hearing Loss
 - fostering predictability so children can rely on routines to reduce the listening demands they face
 - providing regular 'listening breaks' throughout activities where children do not need to listen as attentively and
 - preparing children in advance for any change, or for the unexpected.
-  Provide classroom sound field amplification systems ([see article on www.eartroubles.com](http://www.eartroubles.com));
-  Be aware that both behaviour problems and shyness may be outcomes of listening problems;
-  Foster a school environment where no child is seen as a failure.

When children with listening problems fail less at school, they feel better about themselves, their whole school experience and they are more comfortable about attending school.

There is online training available for teachers of children with listening difficulties at www.eartroubles.com.

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