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Children with protruding ears may cover them with their hair, tape, or headbands. | Photo: Getty Images/Science Photo Library RF

Kids Are Getting Cosmetic Ear Surgery Because of Bullying

Even preschoolers are going under the knife to get their ears “fixed.”

By Nadra Nittle | Apr 9, 2018, 9:30am EDT

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Braidon Fugal is just 12 years old, but next month the Utah student plans to get cosmetic surgery. Born prematurely with undeveloped lungs, Braidon spent his first weeks of life connected to tubes. They kept him from lying down on both sides, causing his left ear to stick out.

“Doctors told me to put a headband on him, but that didn’t work,” says his mother, Melissa Gerard. She couldn’t keep the band secure, so Braidon’s ear continued to protrude. He’s been teased about it since he started school, but with age, his peers have gotten worse, according to

Gerard.

“It happens everywhere — on the playground, in the classroom, after school,” she says. “They pull their ears out and call him ‘Dumbo.’ They are ruthless.”



Once children get otoplasty, they may feel better about revealing their ears. | Photo: Getty Images

So Braidon is getting a procedure called otoplasty to pin back his ear, and he's not alone. About 5 percent of the population has protruding ears, and many of the patients seeking treatment for them are under 18. Even preschool-age children can get the procedure, and otoplasty falls just behind nose reshaping as the most common cosmetic surgery for teens. A number of them are bullied into going under the knife. A 2017 study found that bullying was second to “aesthetic

complaint” as the top reason patients have cosmetic ear surgery. The American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS) notes that while adults typically get surgery to stand out, kids get surgery to fit in.

Braidon is a case in point. When he wakes up from his otoplasty, “I want to see a normal person not having the big ears,” he says, “not getting bullied all the time at school.”

His doctor, Steven Mobley, can relate — to a degree. He grew up with protruding ears, but being a teen in the big-hair days of the 1980s meant that he didn't attract much attention from would-be bullies. Then Top Gun came out in 1986, and Mobley craved Tom Cruise's haircut from the film.

“Every guy had the short military haircut,” he recalls. “I had these huge ears and couldn't get it. I was pushed by pop culture to want to get my ears pinned.”

He had the procedure in 1989 and agrees with the ASPS's take that youth aren't getting cosmetic surgery to get noticed. He says otoplasty patients aren't thinking, “I want to have these smoking hot ears.’ From my own personal experience, I can tell you that if you lined me up with other guys

and put a ruler behind my ears, my ears clearly stuck out. I thought, 'I just want to blend in.' I wasn't bullied that badly."

But about a third to half of the kids Mobley treats are, he says. A decade ago, he established the [Mobley Foundation for Charitable Surgery](#), which provides free otoplasty and other procedures to patients, like Braidon, who otherwise couldn't afford it. Insurance does not cover this cosmetic procedure, and [otoplasty costs \\$3,154 on average](#), according to the ASPS. But that figure does not include anesthesia costs or medical facility fees, which can bring the total to several thousand dollars.

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"I'm extremely thankful," Braidon says of Mobley's decision to treat him for free. "It's really a big deal."

Mobley isn't the only plastic surgeon offering charitable otoplasty surgery. Three years ago, Angela Fisher's teenage daughter Bella contacted [Dr. Joe Niamtu](#), a Virginia plastic surgeon, about getting otoplasty. Protruding ears run in the family, Fisher says. When Bella was younger, kids mostly spared her from teasing. Then the family moved to a new town, where students tormented the girl over her appearance. (Bella did not want to be interviewed for this story.)

"In junior high, a lot more attention was paid to her ears," Fisher says. "Kids would often say stuff about her ears, flying elephant, things like that. She came home from school very upset."

Fisher says her daughter began to pull her hair over her ears in a style that led classmates to call her "grandma." She used headbands so much to cover her ears that she began losing hair up front, her mother says. At her lowest point, Bella slashed her baby pictures displayed around the house because they showed her ears.

"She would lock herself in the bathroom and cry and cry and cry about her ears and

“She would lock herself in the bathroom and cry and cry and cry about her ears and how they were destroying her life”

how they were destroying her life,” Fisher says. “I got her into counseling because she was almost talking like she was going to do something to herself.”

Yvonne Thomas, a Los Angeles

psychologist who specializes in body image and relationships, says that kids who get bullied over their appearance feel lasting effects.

“The hard part is that it isn’t just a temporary phase for these people who are being bullied,” she says. “It can leave internal emotional scars for the rest of their lives, for a lot longer than the bullying is happening. It becomes part of their fixed body image.”

Thomas adds that the internal dialogue of these children can go beyond “look at your ears” to “you’re stupid, you’re ugly.” She says these kids can grow into adults who feel like they don’t deserve the good things in life or that they’ll never attract a partner.

“It can mushroom and permeate their self-esteem on a more global basis,” she says.



Children and teens bullied because of their ears may have lasting emotional scars. | Photo: Getty Images

Tormented at 16, Bella wrote to Niamtu in hopes that he would perform cosmetic ear surgery on her at no cost. Her family couldn't afford to cover the price of otoplasty out of pocket. Fisher is still stunned that Niamtu agreed to treat Bella for free.

"I thought, 'This cannot be serious,'" she recalls. "He's actually going to perform surgery pro bono, as a write-off.' I couldn't believe it."

Today, she calls the procedure one of the best things to happen to her daughter, who she says was very beautiful even before the surgery.

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“She always wears her hair up where you can see her ears now,” Fisher says. “Her confidence has really spiked.”

In February, another Niamtu patient, Bella Harrington, made headlines in [People](#) magazine and on a [Virginia news station](#) because she’d been bullied because of her ears. Kids called her “elf ears,” ironically a look that’s [so popular in China and Japan](#) that people are attaching buds made of soft silicone to their ears to emulate it. In East Asia, the tween’s ears may have earned her praise. In the States, they made her a pariah. She wept after seeing Niamtu’s work.

“They would always, like, point it out, but then the more people pointed it out is when I wanted to change it,” the 11-year-old told WRIC of her decision to get ear surgery. “I thought that they stuck out way too much.”



Dr. Joe Niamtu, Cosmetic Facial Surgery

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While the video of her weeping at the sight of her new ears made it onto chat shows like CBS's *The Talk*, Niamtu says that not everyone was touched by the story. People have contacted him to say, "I can't believe you're doing cosmetic surgery on a kid," he explains. "But the bottom line is that [otoplasty] is not much different from orthodontics. There's not a grade schooler who wants to wear braces. However, we know that with braces they're going to have a much better life."

By about kindergarten, the ear has reached roughly 80 percent of its full size. This is why otoplasty can be performed on young children, while other cosmetic surgeries must wait until the late teen years. Kids generally recover from the surgery in about a week, and while anesthesia is involved, otoplasty is widely deemed a low-risk procedure.

Mobley says he tries to see both sides of the issue and does not push cosmetic ear surgery on children or their families.

"That's not my role," he says. "I'm not cheerleading that you should have your ears pinned. The decision to have the surgery or not have the surgery resides in the home with the child or the people who love that child."

Thomas says that parents who opt for early intervention on protruding ears in children are actually quite sensitive. They're likely preventing their kids from suffering the emotional scars of bullying, she contends.

Niamtu says that some parents of his patients also have protruding ears. They sign their kids up for otoplasty to spare them from the pain they endured. He says



In China and Japan, some people have taken to wearing earbuds that make them look like elves. | Photo: Thanko

people who balk at the idea of children having cosmetic surgery might see the issue differently if they were aware of the distress his patients have experienced. Some have duct-taped or superglued their ears, he says. Bella Harrington wouldn't swim because she didn't want her ears to show. And doctors performed otoplasty on self-conscious patients as far back as the 1800s.

"It's a little different from a facelift," Niamtu says of the surgery. "The patients just want to walk into a room and not have people look at them. They can't go out of the house without getting comments. Cosmetic surgery is elective — nobody has to do it — but I've seen firsthand how it can help people with body image. There's not an easy answer. It's not like anything else."

For Angela Fisher's anguished daughter, otoplasty was "like an act of God," Fisher says. "It was an answer to a prayer."

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