

Playground taunts of 'Dumbo' got you down? Get your ears done

By Joyce C. Tang

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Jason Ludowese knew there was something different about him when he looked in the mirror. His left ear stuck out noticeably farther than his right ear.

"I didn't really want it fixed," says Jason, a cheerful 11-year-old. That is, until one rainy day after school, when some older boys walking down the hall hurled a few insults his way.

"Dumbador!" they shouted. "Elephant ears!"

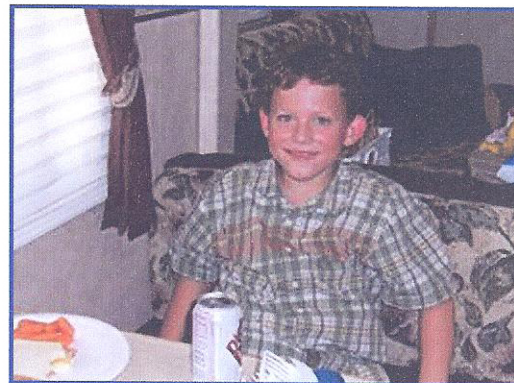
"He also said, 'You can get radio signals with that ear,'" Jason recalls of one tormentor. That year, he underwent surgery to correct the problem.

Prominent ears, or prominauris as it's known in the plastic surgery community, can mean heartache for many children and their parents. It's an abnormality that, for some, can even warrant going under the knife.

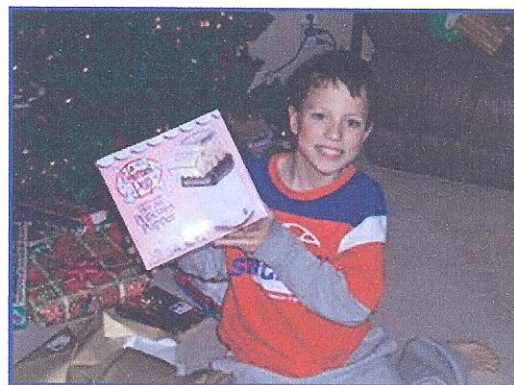
In 2007, otology, or cosmetic ear surgery, was the leading plastic surgery procedure for children under 18, according to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. Until recently, nose jobs, or rhinoplasty, had been the procedure of choice for young people for more than a decade, with the exception of a brief surge in otoplasty in 2002.

To the horror of some, elective cosmetic surgery can be performed as young as 5 years old, which is when the ears are 80 percent fully grown and children become eligible for otoplasty.

Though some may consider the procedure frivolous, the risks are not. They include



Jason's left ear "just stuck straight out to the side," says LaVonda Reed, Jason's mother. (Photo courtesy of LaVonda Reed)



Post-surgery, Jason Ludowese doesn't feel much different, but says his ears look much better. (Photo courtesy of LaVonda Reed)

bleeding, infection and the dangers of general anesthesia for small children, not to mention unsatisfactory outcomes. Some doctors are also skeptical about a child's ability to understand the procedure.

"A child has limitations," says Dr. Paul Horowitz, a pediatrician and fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics, who worries about situations in which "the parent is giving informed consent on behalf of the child, but the child grows up and says, 'Gee, I didn't really want that done. I would have been fine having my natural ears.'"

The subject has at times become fodder for rancor on parenting sites and message boards. When a parent on UrbanBaby.com posted a comment about getting a 4-year-old son's ears fixed, for fear he might be the target of ridicule later in life, an appalled parent replied, "you're joking right?" before pointing out that going ahead with the procedure would send a message to the son that something was wrong with him.

Some parents, though, just don't want to take any chances.

"In a perfect world, you raise your kids to have such strong self-esteem that they don't have eating disorders, they don't do drugs," says Jennifer Buckley, a dermatologist from Atlanta, whose 6-year-old son had otoplasty. "That's in a perfect world."

Having the procedure done early on, particularly before school age, means children could avoid any potential teasing, says Dr. Matthew Schulman, assistant professor of plastic surgery at The Mount Sinai School of Medicine.

While the eyes may be the windows to one's soul, the ears, for the most part, sit unnoticed on the periphery unless they stick out like a sore, well, ear. Doctors typically identify a prominent ear as one whose rim is more than 15 millimeters away from the side of the head, or the width of a finger. Prominent ears can elicit cruel grade-school name calling, turning lovable cartoon characters such as Dumbo, Mickey Mouse, and Bugs Bunny into mean-spirited affronts.

Doug Monk was the brunt of such taunts throughout his childhood.

"Monkey is real close to Monk," says the 51-year-old construction worker from Monticello, Iowa. In kindergarten, a precocious classmate with a knack for homophones realized the coincidence, and the nickname stuck throughout Monk's childhood. While girls can hide their ears with long hair, Monk's mother always gave him a close-cropped haircut, which made things worse.

When he was 12, Monk's parents drove him to the idyllic-sounding town of Strawberry Point for summer camp. "I was only there for a week," he says. "I was trying to blend in and be cool. But soon enough, a fellow female camper "made some comment about my monkey ears."

"When you're that age, you're just starting to notice the opposite sex, so that really got me," Monk says. Unable to afford otoplasty, he never underwent the surgery.

Today, it remains a pricey procedure. In 2007 the average otoplasty surgery cost \$3,085. The procedure is rarely covered by health insurance, as most companies consider it to be a cosmetic fix.

Some plastic surgeons argue that otoplasty is a quality-of-life procedure.

“People who get it are not looking to stand out or look like a model; they just want to fit in,” says Dr. Frederick Lukash, an assistant clinical professor of surgery at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine who has written a position paper on teenage plastic surgery. A 1992 article in the British Journal of Plastic Surgery showed that prominent ear correction relieved psychosocial distress in 90 percent of the children it studied.

Playground taunts aren't the only concern for people with protruding ears. “We knew how society worked,” says Jason's mother, LaVonda Reed, of Allen, Texas. She didn't want Jason's ears interfering with his dating life or getting a job. People with big ears, she says, face a greater stigma even in the adult world. “You think of them as dumb,” Reed says.

Dr. Steven J. White, who performed Jason's surgery, agrees.

“The societal impression is that big ears are bad, and they're abnormal, and you just stand out because you look different than everyone else,” White says.

“Noses,” on the other hand, “have a lot of variation,” he added.

Now, two years later, Jason has a matching set of ears.

As for Doug Monk, he says he's learned, like many others, to live with his ears. “It got to the point where it didn't bother me anymore,” he says, acknowledging that this didn't happen until he was 35.

Though he'd tell others who can afford the surgery to “go for it,” Monk says he's happy now the way he is.

“My wife thinks they're beautiful,” he says of his ears. “She was homecoming queen, and if she thinks they're cool, then really I don't care.”

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