

Hearing loss linked to poor school attendance in the Northern Territory

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The first study investigating the independent impact of hearing impairment (HI) on school attendance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children has been released today in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*.

The study by Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies), *The impact of hearing impairment on Aboriginal children's school attendance in remote Northern Territory: a data linkage study*, found that on average, Aboriginal children with HI, including mild and unilateral hearing loss, attended four to six days fewer school days than their counterparts with normal hearing.

According to project leader, Professor Steven Guthridge from Menzies' Centre for Child Development and Education, the consequences of low school attendance are serious and long-lasting.

"Many studies have associated low school attendance rates with poor academic achievements and early school leaving, which are in turn associated with poorer social outcomes," Prof Guthridge said.

"School attendance is of particular concern in the Northern Territory (NT), with Aboriginal students, on average, only attending 70 per cent of the time for primary and 50 per cent in secondary, compared with the target of 90 per cent set by the Council of Australian Governments.

"In this study, we were particularly interested in exploring the role poor hearing plays in school attendance, with identification of the impact from the early years.

"To do this, we used a range of linked datasets containing routinely collected health and education data to investigate the impact of HI on Aboriginal students' school attendance in Year One."

According to lead author, Menzies' Dr Jiunn-Yih Su, an important outcome of the study was the identification of unilateral hearing loss (UHL) having a similar impact on school attendance to mild and moderate HI.

"Children with UHL are generally not considered to have HI, due to their better ear being normal-hearing, resulting in management often being overlooked. We found that the children in our cohort with UHL attended on average 5.6 fewer days than their normal hearing peers.

"This was in our higher range of reduced attendance levels and highlights the need to actively detect and support children with UHL," Dr Su said.

Despite the gap identified by the study, Prof Guthridge said awareness in the educational system, together with routine hearing screening tests, can reduce the potential for long-term negative effects.

“A common response for children with hearing loss is to disengage. By ensuring early and active detection of students with HI along with facilitating appropriate educational support at the earliest possible stage of their schooling may be conducive to children’s school attendance,” Prof Guthridge said.

Of consequence, the study found other community-level factors caused greater impact on attendance. Crowded housing, in particular, was associated with 24.7 fewer school days attended, approximately four times the impact of hearing impairment.

The study is one of a series of studies conducted in the Hearing Loss in Kids (HeloKids) Project, funded by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

The full paper can be viewed [here](#). *N.B. This link will be live on 31 October 2019.*

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Menzies School of Health Research

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