

(Parkland Life Column for September 2008)
**Reshaping “Problem Ears” Can Dramatically Change Appearance...
and Improve Self-Confidence**
By David J. Levens, MD, PA, FACS

Children can be cruel. On almost every playground, there is an embarrassed boy or girl who has been nicknamed Dumbo to denote oversized or protruding ears. Fortunately, there is a solution in otoplasty (ear reshaping), one of the few cosmetic surgeries that is appropriate for children.

Otoplasty is performed on children as young as 5 or 6, when the ears are at or full development. In fact, in cases where the ears are deformed or severely prominent, family doctors and pediatricians often recommend surgery be done early to avoid teasing by classmates. Recovery is relatively brief with little discomfort.

Of course, the procedure isn't just for kids. Many adults who have been self-conscious about their ears since childhood choose to have corrective surgery. Patient satisfaction rates are extremely high, because changes in the size, shape and projection of the ears and earlobes can dramatically improve overall facial balance and appearance.

Otoplasty is a rather straightforward, outpatient procedure. The degree and location of the ear deformity determines the surgeon's exact approach. Generally, incisions are placed behind the ear. The skin is then elevated in some areas and the underlying cartilage framework is exposed. The cartilage is reshaped through scoring, suturing, limited removal, or a combination of these techniques.

The reshaped framework is thus repositioned to achieve the best balance with the opposite side and to reduce excessive projection. The skin is re-draped, excess skin may be removed, and the incision behind the ear is closed.

Next, a light pressure dressing is placed on the head to protect the ears, maintain their new position and to minimize swelling and excessive fluid accumulation beneath the skin. This dressing is removed in 5-7 days.

All incisions are closed with small stitches that may be dissolvable and therefore don't have to be removed. Patients can wash their hair as soon as the head dressing is removed.

There is mild soreness for 1-2 weeks after surgery, primarily if the ears are bumped or moved. Some swelling in the ears can be expected for 4-6 weeks. Bruising fades in 2-3

weeks. Most patients return to social activity 7 to 10 days after surgery, though aerobic or strenuous activity should be avoided for 4-6 weeks

To ensure realistic expectations, patients are advised in advance that no two ears are exactly the same size or shape, and very small differences may continue to exist after surgery. Also, cartilage forms the framework of the ear. When it is modified, it tends to try to return to its original shape, due to its property of “memory”. During surgery, weakening and suturing of the cartilage is performed to reduce this tendency. However, despite best efforts, ear prominence can recur in a small number of patients. In those cases, a revision procedure may be necessary.

Finally, risks common to all surgical procedures such as bleeding, infection, numbness and scar tissue formation occur in a small percentage of cases. Children do very well, and with most adult otoplasty patients, their only regret is not having it done sooner.

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David J. Levens, MD, PA, FACS is a Columbia University Medical School graduate, a Board-certified plastic surgeon, and former Chief of Surgery at Coral Springs Medical Center. In practice in Coral Springs since 1989, he can be reached at 954-752-1020 or www.DrLevens.com.