

Youth Experiences with the R-Word

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About the R-word Campaign

Special Olympics strives to gain respect and acceptance for individuals with disabilities worldwide. Our organization is taking a stand against the r-word, retard, with the R-word Campaign. The goals of the campaign are to communicate the hurtful nature of the r-word and remove it from daily use. As part of the campaign we are also striving to educate people about what it means to have a disability and how using the r-word supports a negative stereotype.

The r-word, retard, is slang for the term mental retardation. Mental retardation was what doctors, psychologists, and other professionals used to describe people with significant intellectual impairment. Today the r-word has become a common word used by society as an insult for someone or something stupid. For example, you might hear someone say, “That is so retarded” or “Don’t be such a retard.” When used in this way, the r-word can apply to anyone or anything, and is not specific to someone with a disability. But, even when the r-word is not said to harm someone with a disability, it *is* hurtful.

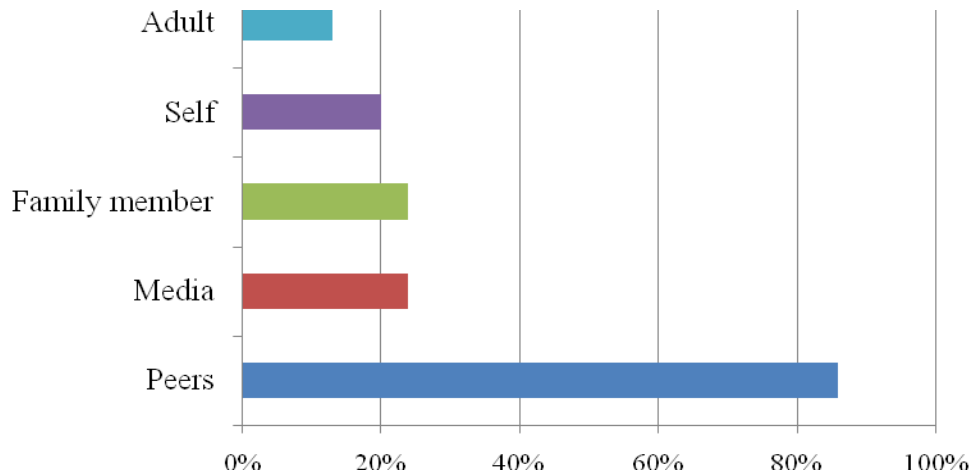
Learning more about the r-word

In order to learn more about youth experiences with the r-word, staff from Special Olympics, the Special Olympics Global Collaborating Centerⁱ at the University of Massachusetts Boston, and the Harris Interactive®ⁱⁱ worked together to design an online survey. In this online survey, youth across the country were asked questions about the r-word, including whether they have ever heard the word, and if so, how they reacted to hearing it. Over a thousand youth between the ages of 8 and 18 responded to the online survey.

Results at a Glance

- Almost all youth (92%) have heard a person use the r-word. (see Figure 1) Most (86%) have heard the word used by their friends or other students at school. Youth have also heard the word from others like people in the media or even from a family member (24%). Only a few youth (20%) said that they use the word themselves.

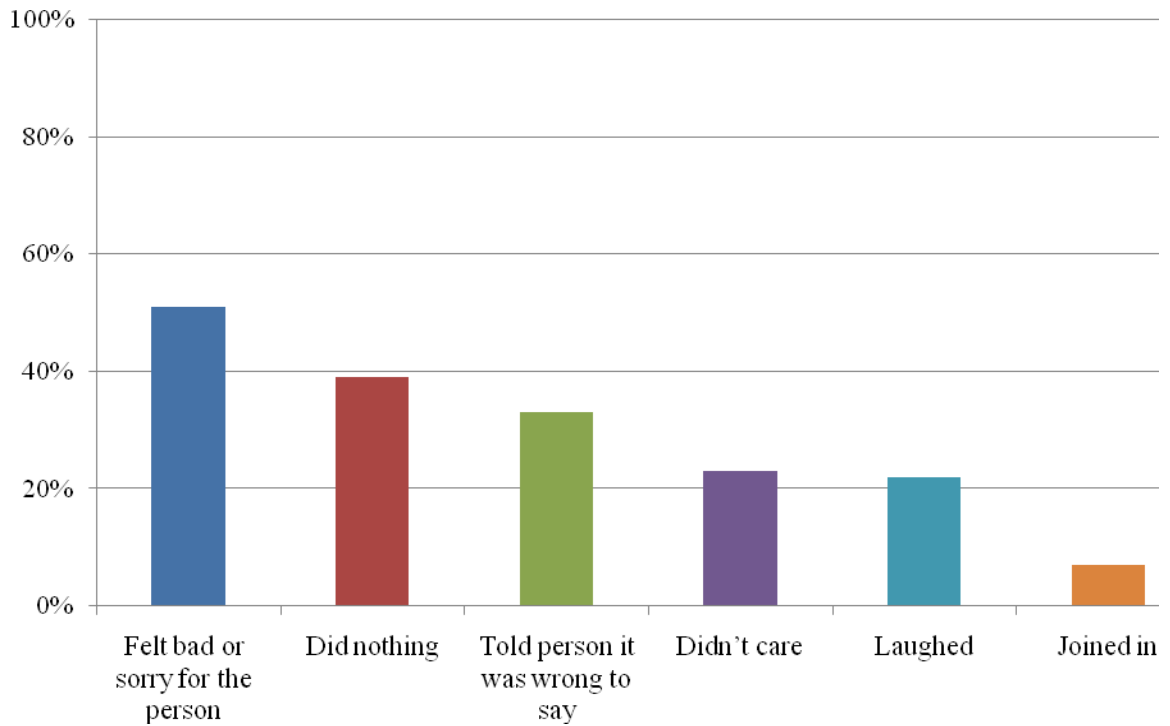
Figure 1. Who do youth hear saying the r-word?



*Youth were allowed multiple choices.

- Youth react to the r-word in different ways (see Figure 2). Half of youth (51%) said that they felt bad or sorry for the person being picked. Some responded that they either laughed or didn't care when they heard the r-word and many (39%) said that they did nothing. Some youth (33%) took a stand and told the person it was wrong to say the r-word.

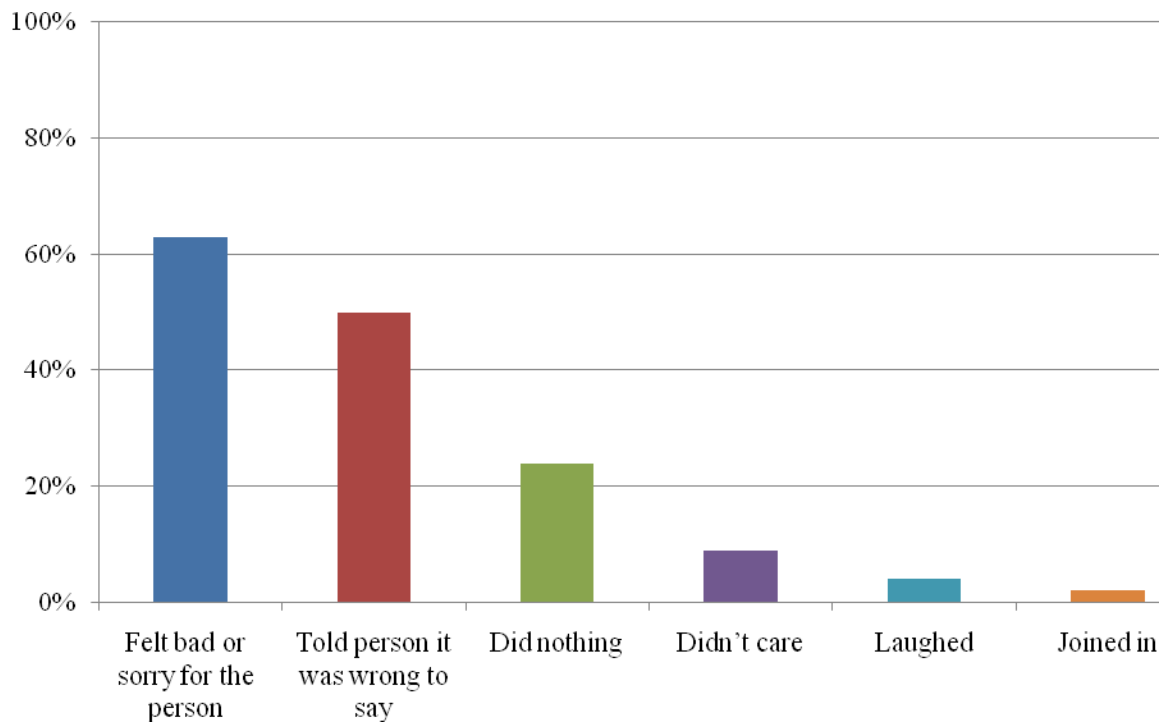
Figure 2. How do youth react when they hear someone use the r-word?



*Youth were allowed multiple choices.

- When youth hear someone with a disability called the r-word they react in different ways (see Figure 3). In this situation, many youth (63%) said that they felt bad or sorry for the person being picked on, and half took a stand and told the person it was wrong to say the r-word. Fewer youth said that they laughed or didn't care but many (24%) still said that they did nothing.

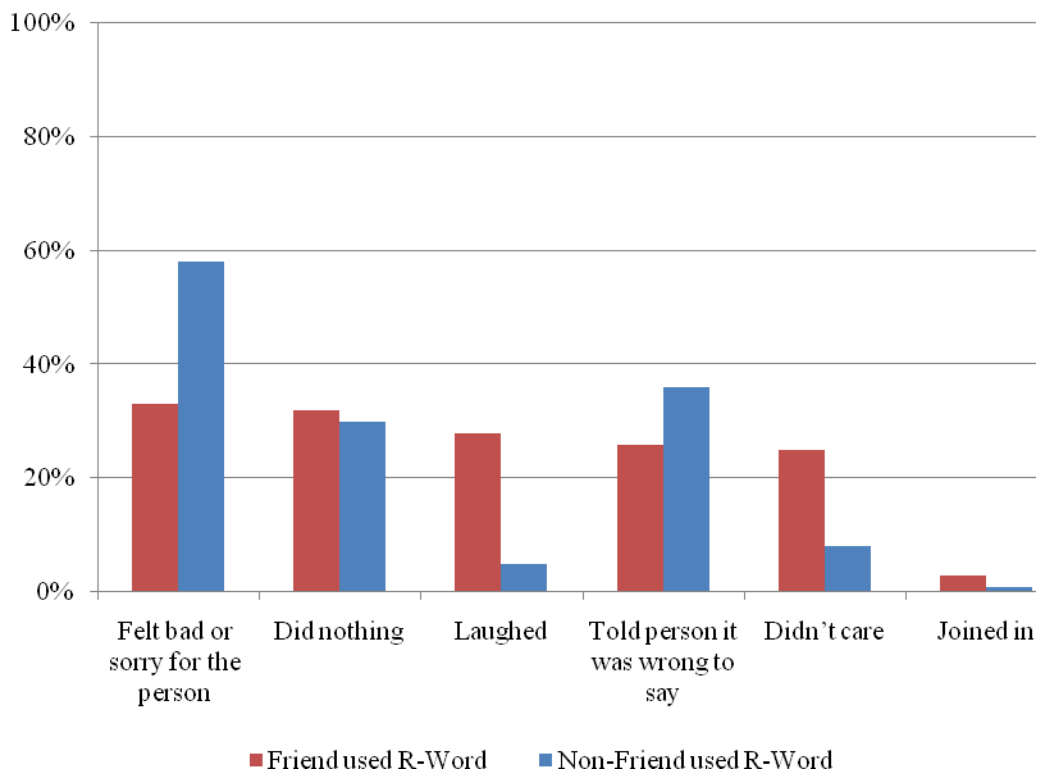
Figure 3. How do youth react when they hear someone with a disability called the r-word?



*Youth were allowed multiple choices.

- Youth also react differently depending on who says the r-word (see Figure 4). When a friend used the r-word, youth were more likely to laugh (28%) or not care (25%). When a non-friend used the word, more than half (58%) felt bad or sorry for the person being picked on and many (36%) told the person it was wrong to say.

Figure 4. Do youth react differently when they hear a friend call someone with a disability the r-word?



*Youth were allowed multiple choices.

- Finally, boys and girls react differently to the r-word. Compared to boys, girls were more likely to feel sorry for the person being picked on (61%) and were more likely to say it was wrong to say the r-word (40%). Also, children in elementary school were more likely to feel sorry for the person being picked on (62%) than older students in high school.

Reviewing and applying the results

Now it is your turn to think about what these results mean to you.

We found that almost all youth have heard the r-word and most have heard it used by a friend or a student at school. We also found that youth react differently to the r-word if it is directed at a person with a disability or if a friend says the word.

These results are based on responses from youth across the country, but they may not reflect your own experiences or beliefs about the r-word. As you answer the questions below, think about the results of the survey and your own experiences with the r-word.

- Do any of the results surprise you?
- Why do you think youth use the r-word?
- Do you think the word means something different when it is said to someone with a disability?
- How do you explain that almost all youth hear their peers use the r-word but they say they don't use it themselves?
- If you heard someone use the r-word, what would you do? What do you think most of your friends would do?
 - Would you ever tell someone it was wrong to say the r-word? If you would, how would you tell them? If you wouldn't, why not?
 - What would you do if a close friend used the r-word?
 - Why do you think fewer youth don't care when a friend uses the r-word?
 - Why are they more likely to laugh?

ⁱ **About the Special Olympics Global Collaborating Center**

The Special Olympics Global Collaborating Center of the Center for Social Development and Education at the University of Massachusetts Boston is an internationally recognized research institute that conducts rigorous scientific research that is of value to the international community. In recent years, the GCC has conducted studies on the impact of Special Olympics on its constituents, and on attitudes of youth and adults internationally toward individuals with intellectual disabilities. For more information, please visit www.csde.umb.edu

ⁱⁱ **About Harris Interactive**

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