



## **Submission from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists to The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) in Northern Ireland.**

1. Please find enclosed the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) briefing to The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation. RCSLT thanks you for the opportunity to comment upon this important issue and will invite our membership in Northern Ireland to contribute to your consultation process.

### **General comments**

2. The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) is the professional body for speech and language therapists (SLTs), SLT students and support workers working in the UK. We have around 15,000 members (around 700 in Northern Ireland) including 87% of the SLTs practising in the UK. We promote excellence in practice and influence health, education, employment, social care and justice policies.
3. SLTs have a major role in working directly with young people and adults, as well as supporting and training other professionals in working with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

### **The context of speech, language and communication needs**

4. Speech, Language and Communication difficulties affect more children and young people in Northern Ireland (NI) than any other single condition and are core impairments for many children with a learning, physical or sensory disability.<sup>1</sup> Language and communication difficulties represent a substantial problem in the community, affecting 7-10% of all children<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Northern Ireland Speech and Language Therapy Task Force: Report on Speech and Language Therapy Services for Children and Young People, July 2008

<sup>2</sup> Gascoigne MT (ed). (2012) Better communication – shaping speech, language and communication services for children and young people. London: RCSLT.

5. In areas of high social deprivation the percentage of children with difficulties is considerably higher than this. A prevalence study in the Colin area in Belfast in 2009 highlighted that 41% of children entering primary one had speech, language and communication difficulties<sup>3</sup> and in Twinbrook a similar study identified a 55% prevalence rate of SLCN in pre school children. Ninety per cent of the 1.5 million people in the UK with a learning disability also have SLCN and sixty per cent of young offenders have SLCN<sup>4</sup>.
6. A recent Save the Children report<sup>5</sup> highlights the significance of communication for fostering life chances in early childhood. In 2012 Ofsted revised its framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)<sup>6</sup>. This report placed strong emphasis on communication and language as one of three prime areas considered to be crucial for igniting children's curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, and for building their capacity to learn, form relationships and thrive.
7. The Better Communication Research Programme<sup>7</sup> reports that 'the likelihood of being identified as having speech language and communication needs (SLCN) was two to three times greater for pupils entitled to free school meals and living in more deprived neighbourhoods.

## **The links between child sexual exploitation and speech, language and communication difficulties.**

8. In responding to this inquiry, RCSLT considers that there are three strands where speech, language and communication skills are critical factors to be considered.
  - Speech language and communication skills as a predictor of neglect
  - Speech, language and communication skills and risk of harm
  - Speech, language and communication skills and achieving best evidence through the judicial process

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<sup>3</sup> Coulter, Halligan and Jordan, 2009

<sup>4</sup> Juliette Gregory & Karen Bryan, Speech and Language Therapy Intervention with a Group of Persistent and Prolific Young Offenders in a Non-Custodial Setting with Previously Undiagnosed Speech, Language and Communication Difficulties, 46 INT'L J. LANGUAGE COMM. DISORDERS 202, 203 (2011).

<sup>5</sup> Early Language Delay in the UK Save the Children: Law et al 2013

<sup>6</sup> <http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/e/eyfs%20statutory%20framework%20march%202012.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> G Lindsay, J Dockrell, J Law, and S Roulstone, 'The Better Communication Research Programme: Improving provision for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs', in DfE, (ed). <http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/research/better2012>.

## 1. Speech language and communication skills as a predictor of neglect

9. It is accepted that speech, language and communication needs are the most common developmental difficulties faced by children. Seven per cent (or two in every classroom) of all children have SLCN, rising to fifty per cent of children from socially disadvantaged communities<sup>8</sup>. Difficulties may be due to brain development problems or other physical or sensory impairments. They may also, however, be due to reduced developmental opportunities in the child's family and educational environment which limit the child's learning of language. There is evidence that reduced developmental opportunities are commonly linked to social disadvantage and or neglect.
10. Very young mistreated children commonly have speech and language delays and unusual interaction. This is often associated with the way that they have developed attachments with their parents. Neglect needs to be considered separately from abuse. Communication problems and delayed speech and language development are some of the most obvious effects of neglect. However, neglect has proved difficult to identify because it involves acts of omission rather than commission and often there is no physical evidence for it.
11. The strong association between poor speech and language development and parenting skills is now well documented. At a recent presentation in Northern Ireland, Professor Pam Snow from Monash University Australia stated that 'the rate of language impairment in children from a *maltreated* background is higher (25%) compared to children from a *non-maltreated* background who are from a comparable socio economic background (17%), compared to the general population (10%)<sup>9</sup>. Children who have experienced maltreatment are likely to have language problems, particularly in receptive domains and may therefore be harder to detect'.
12. There is also global evidence that poor language ability in the early years increases the risk of antisocial behaviour at 14 years of age<sup>10</sup>. The authors of these studies argue that overcoming oral language deficits in the early years should be a focus of prevention and early intervention strategies aimed at reducing the prevalence of antisocial behaviour.
13. Another study emphasises the link between language impairment and *out of home* (Looked after Children). 'In our most recent study of 100 young males completing custodial sentences the prevalence of language impairment increased to sixty two per cent in those who had a history of out-of-home care

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<sup>8</sup> All Party Parliamentary Group on Speech and Language Difficulties (Westminster): The Links Between speech, language and communication and social disadvantage (Feb. 2013):

[http://www.rcslt.org/governments/docs/appg\\_report\\_feb\\_2013](http://www.rcslt.org/governments/docs/appg_report_feb_2013)

<sup>9</sup> Snow, P.C. & Powell, M.B. (2011). Youth (In)justice: Oral language competence in early life and risk for engagement in antisocial behaviour in adolescence. *Trends & Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, 435.

<sup>10</sup> Bor W, McGee TR & Fagan AA 2004. Early risk factors for adolescent antisocial behaviour: An Australian longitudinal study. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 38(5): 365–372

placement – in itself a marker of extreme vulnerability, but in many cases a missed early intervention opportunity<sup>11</sup>.

14. These considerations underline the importance of systems for **early identification of communication difficulties**. Such difficulties need to be picked up not only in their own right but also as a potential indicator of welfare issues. Early identification of communication deficits is therefore critical in ruling out parenting and other social welfare concerns.

## 2. Speech, language and communication skills and risk of harm

15. The link between safeguarding and communication difficulties also works in the opposite direction: children and adults who have complex needs are more at risk of abuse and this is in part because of their communication difficulties. Studies have suggested that disabled children are more likely to experience abuse than their peers and that children with communication difficulties could be at greater risk of abuse than other disabled children.<sup>12</sup>
16. A study in the United States<sup>13</sup> estimated that the increased risk runs at 1.7 times more than for children without disabilities across all types of abuse and that they are four to ten times more vulnerable to sexual abuse than their non-disabled peers. Sobsey<sup>14</sup> thought that disabled children were approximately twice as likely to have experienced abuse as their non-disabled peers (Sobsey, 1994:4).
17. Deaf children seemed to experience a particularly high level of sexual abuse. Kvam (2004) reported that deaf women in Norway reported childhood sexual abuse more than twice as often as the hearing population (39.6% as compared to 19.2%) and that deaf men were more than three times as likely to have been abused (32.8% compared to 9.6% in the general population). Communication skills are regarded as being a factor for difficulty in disclosure.
18. Many of the children and young people in the cases of abuse and neglect that have hit the headlines recently, have been identified as having speech and language difficulties. Some of the most vulnerable children are those whose impairments prevent them from communicating what has happened to them (and who may therefore be deliberately targeted by some perpetrators of abuse).<sup>15</sup>

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11 Snow PC & Powell MB 2011b. Oral language competence in incarcerated young offenders: Links with offending severity. *International Journal of Speech Language Pathology*.

<http://informahealthcare.com/doi/abs/10.3109/17549507.2011.578661>

12 Stalker, K. and McArthur, K. (2010) Child abuse, child protection and disabled children: a review of recent research, *Child Abuse Review* (see p. 2 and p. 14). Snow, P. (2009) Child maltreatment, mental health and oral language competence: inviting speech-language pathology to the prevention table, *International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 11(2), pp. 95-103 (see p. 99).

13 NCCAN (1996). Report of third national incidence study, National Centre for Child Abuse and Neglect. Washington, DC. Online at <<http://www.yesican.org/stats.html>>

14 Sobsey, R. (1994). Violence and abuse in the lives of people with disabilities. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes

<sup>15</sup> Westcott, H. and Jones, D. (1999) Annotation: the abuse of disabled children, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 40(4), pp. 497-506 (see pp. 503-4).

19. The Winterbourne scandal highlights how individuals with a learning disability are much more at risk of being a victim than the general population. There is an incremental likelihood that the more significant the individual's communication difficulty, the likelier it is that a perpetrator will escape justice. [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/213215/final-report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/213215/final-report.pdf)
20. It is in the public domain that In recent years in Northern Ireland there have been cases of alleged serious sexual assault, rape and manslaughter brought before the courts which have involved children and young people with significant communication difficulties. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-27635619>

### 3. Speech, language and communication skills and achieving best evidence through the judicial process.

21. In Northern Ireland the Department of Justice (DoJ) is currently piloting the Registered Intermediary (RI) Scheme, in recognition of the increased need for support for people with communication difficulties during the judicial process. An intermediary can be appointed by the Department of Justice NI to assess the communication skills of a victim, witness and or defendant and determine additional supports required.
22. The Criminal Evidence (NI) Order 1999 provides for a number of special measures, including the use of an intermediary, to assist vulnerable and intimidated witnesses (both for the prosecution and the defence) to give their best possible evidence in criminal proceedings.
23. Article 17 of the 1999 Order provides for the examination of a victim or witness through an intermediary. Article 21BA of the 1999 Order, as inserted by section 12 of the Justice Act (NI) 2011, provides for the examination of a vulnerable defendant through an intermediary when they are giving oral evidence.
24. Since May 2013, 163 requests for RIs have been received by the DoJ NI. This clearly evidences that there are a number of children and young people with communication difficulties who require assistance in giving best evidence.
- 69 requests have been in respect of adults
  - 31 for teenagers.
  - 10 aged between 10 and 12 years.
  - 53 for victims under 10 years (youngest 2 years).

25. We recognise that not all of these cases will go forward to the courts. However, they do give a clear indication that in Northern Ireland children with communication difficulties are experiencing significant risk of harm.
26. Speech and language therapists are unique in their expertise in assessing language and communication skills and determining the support that children and young people with SLCN require to express their views and recount their experiences. This can include introducing communication strategies or alternative and augmentative communication systems to help children communicate in interviews with social workers and advice and guidance on modifying the comprehension level of questions being put to them.
27. SLTs can also support other professionals working with children with SLCN. This can involve training health visiting and social work teams to identify and support children with SLCN and also helping police officers to determine whether a child's communication difficulties may have prevented him or her from reporting injuries inflicted through abuse.
28. SLTs can also provide expert guidance in producing accessible communication formats. In Northern Ireland the RCSLT has worked with the Youth Justice Agency in developing an E-Learning tool 'The Box', and in quality assuring advice leaflets for users of their service. The Youth Justice Agency has now implemented E-Learning training for all their staff to enable them to recognise, support and make onward referrals as appropriate for young people with communication difficulties.

## In conclusion

29. Speech, language and communication skills are key factors to consider in relation to child sexual exploitation for the following reasons.
- Delayed speech and language skills can be an early indicator of neglect.
  - Children who are *looked after* are also likely to have a higher prevalence of speech language and communication deficits.
  - Current research indicates a prevalence rate of sixty per cent of SLCN amongst young offenders.
  - Evidence supports the fact that children and adults with communication difficulties are at greater risk of harm than the general population.
  - Children with SLCN going through the judicial process will require additional specialist support to be able to give best evidence.
30. Young offenders with speech and language deficits will become parents themselves and will thus continue a cycle of poor communication enrichment with their own children. These risk factors need to be addressed if we are to reduce child sexual exploitation and neglect. A focus on speech, language and communication should be core elements in early intervention and youth diversion programmes and SLTs should be key members of early intervention, CAMHS and LAC teams.

***This response was submitted by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists to the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Northern Ireland on 23 July 2014.***

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