

Working with young offenders

Improving the communication skills of young offenders by providing speech and language therapy significantly reduces the risk of reoffending, increases access to rehabilitation and treatment programmes, and can improve an individual's chances of gaining employment.



John's isolation and aggression

John struggled to communicate his thoughts and feelings; he isolated himself from others and expressed his frustrations through violent outbursts. Staff at John's young offender institution had difficulty managing his behaviour and referred him to the speech and language therapy service.

The initial assessment identified that John had a 'social communication deficit' (difficulties interacting with other people due to an underlying medical condition). A further assessment with the mental health team led to a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome.

Working jointly with a psychologist, speech and language therapists supported John to overcome his speech, learning and communication difficulties, and take steps towards rehabilitation. Through therapy, John learnt how to communicate with others and control his violent behaviour. He became a model offender, no longer displayed violent behaviour in custody and was able to access the institution's learning courses.

Speech and language therapy work has been invaluable to John and his family. It has reduced the chances of him reoffending and increased his chances of contributing to society.

The size of the problem

- ▶ More than **60%** of young people in the youth justice estate can have difficulties with speech, language or communication.¹
- ▶ A study by Bryan et al (2007) suggested that **66-90%** of young offenders have low language skills, with **46-67%** of these being in the poor or very poor range.
- ▶ Up to a third of children with untreated speech and language difficulties will develop subsequent mental health problems, with resulting criminal involvement in some cases.²



The importance of identifying speech, language and communication needs

Many young people with speech, language and communication needs lack the language skills to understand what is happening to them within the justice system or the implications of what is being asked of them.³ For example, many have difficulty understanding commonly used vocabulary, such as the words 'victim' and 'breach'.⁴

- Evidence shows that around 40% of offenders find it difficult or are unable to benefit from and access rehabilitation programmes that are delivered verbally, such as drug rehabilitation courses.⁵
- Approximately a third of young offenders have speaking and listening skills below the tested level of an 11 year old⁶ and are unable to access education and treatment programmes due to their poor language and literacy skills.

An essential service

Too few people understand the role speech and language therapists have in helping young people with speech, language or communication difficulties, and how they can help prevent youth offending and reoffending.

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists is calling on GPs, commissioners, budget holders and care providers to:

- Ensure children and young people with speech, language and communication difficulties have access to the speech and language therapy services they need within a community setting and that professionals know when to refer.
- Provide training and support for professionals working with young offenders to help them identify signs of speech, language and communication difficulties.

➤ For more information visit: www.rcslt.org

How speech and language therapy services can help

- Speech and language therapists play an important role in identifying unmet speech and communication needs. Research has shown that levels of awareness of communication difficulty have been found to be very low in both the historical and present environments of young offenders.⁷
- Speech and language therapy interventions help prevent and reduce re-offending by increasing verbal communication skills and enabling individuals to access a wider range of rehabilitation and treatment programmes.⁸
- Offenders respond positively to speech and language therapy. For example, a study in Leeds young offender institution found **88%** of young people with expressive language difficulties who received intensive therapy made significant gains on formal testing.⁹



REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

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