

## Supporting the most disadvantaged families: the link with speech, language and communication

Research demonstrates a strong link between speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) and the problems that many of the most disadvantaged families face. Supporting families' speech, language and communication could enable local authorities to deliver significant and sustained progress for these families, including those supported through the Troubled Families Programme.

### 1. Parents or children involved in crime or anti-social behaviour

Children and young people with SLCN are at a significantly higher risk of involvement in both the justice system and anti-social behaviour:

- **Crime:** 66-90% of young offenders have low language skills, with 46-67% of these being in the poor or very poor range.<sup>1</sup>
- **Anti-social behaviour:** Analysis of Millennium Cohort data showed that children with severe conduct problems are three times more likely to have low verbal ability, and that verbal ability appears to be a powerful protective factor, substantially reducing the likelihood of conduct problems.<sup>2</sup>

Efforts to address these young people's behaviour problems may be ineffective without adapting interventions to take account of their SLCN: research has found that around 40% of young offenders might find it difficult to benefit from verbally mediated interventions such as anger management and drug rehabilitation courses.<sup>3</sup>

#### How speech and language therapy can help: R's story

R was a 17 year old Looked After Child. R had a history of persistent multiple offences and was a chaotic drug user. He was perceived by Youth Offending Team (YOT) officers as difficult to manage and engage due to his chaotic and volatile presentation compounded by drug use. His engagement with the YOT was extremely erratic. Although R complied with the terms of his Court Order, YOT officers were frustrated at the lack of progress in changing his behaviours. R was assessed by the YOT speech and language therapist (SLT) and diagnosed with Developmental Language Disorder.\*

R met with the YOT SLT in order to understand the implications of this diagnosis and the impact of the language disorder on his life. By working hard to understand how his communication difficulties have affected his life R has reworked the thinking that underpinned many of his offences. He can understand why he struggled at school and he has now developed strategies to enable him to maintain employment.

### 2. Children who have not been attending school regularly

- In a study of pupils at risk of exclusion from school, two thirds were found to have SLCN.<sup>4</sup>
- Pupil referral units in the London Borough of Newham screen all children and young people for communication needs the day before they are due to attend. In 2016/17, 90% of the cohort presented with moderate-significant speech and language difficulties, and only a small number of these had previously had their communication needs identified.<sup>5</sup>

#### How speech and language therapy can help: J's story

J was receiving individual support in the inclusion/nurture house at a secondary school for children with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, as he was not able to mix with other students. A previous attempt to reintegrate J into a mainstream school had been unsuccessful, and he returned to the secondary SEMH school, but with lengthy periods of absence. The SLT assessed J and, on the basis of that assessment, proposed that J might benefit from a social skills group at another mainstream school. The SLT arranged for this to be set up and the student's attendance and participation has increased.

\* Developmental language disorder (DLD) is a condition where children have problems understanding and/or using spoken language. There is no obvious reason for these difficulties – no hearing problem or physical disability explains them. It is estimated that 7.6% of all children have DLD.

### **3. Children who need help: children of all ages, who need help, are identified as in need or are subject to a Child Protection Plan**

- Insecure attachment, a lack of quality stimulation, neglect and conflict all have negative effects on a child's development<sup>6</sup> including on their speech, language and communication skills.<sup>7</sup>
- High-risk young people, such as those who are subject to child protection orders because of suspected or confirmed maltreatment, face an elevated risk of SLCN.<sup>8</sup>

#### **How speech and language therapy can help: F's story**

F is 15. Prior to her present placement, she had had 20 previous placement breakdowns. With a history of aggressive behaviour, including being verbally and physically abusive, she started her placement on a 3:1 staffing ratio due to the risk of assaulting staff. She had a large number of police charges pending. Following staff concern about her communication skills and inability to understand information, an SLT undertook a full assessment of F. This revealed that she had a range of unidentified SLCN. The SLT advised both F and those working with her how best to support her communication needs, including when attending court.

As a result of this speech and language therapy input, F's communication, social skills and behaviour improved and the charges against her were dropped. Staffing levels were reduced to 2:1 and 1:1 support was trialled at school.

### **4. Adults out of work or at risk of financial exclusion, or young people at risk of worklessness**

- A study of unemployed young men found that 88% had some level of language difficulty.<sup>9</sup>
- Young adults with DLD have been found to be unemployed four times longer than their peers.<sup>10</sup>

### **5. Families affected by domestic violence and abuse**

Speech, language and communication needs are a risk factor for abuse, and in turn exposure to domestic violence can increase the risk of developing SLCN:

- Children with SLCN have been found to be at greater risk of abuse and neglect<sup>11</sup> and maltreatment increases their vulnerability to SLCN.<sup>12</sup>
- Pre-school children exposed to domestic violence are at risk of developing SLCN: comparisons between children's achievement in a Refuge play-centre and in the community showed a significant difference in hearing and speech development.<sup>13</sup>

### **6. Parents or children with a range of health problems (including drug or alcohol abuse)**

- Perinatal mental health issues have a negative effect on the mother and subsequently her ability to provide an environment and interactions that will encourage language development.<sup>14</sup>
- Children with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder have significantly lower language skills than their peers.<sup>15</sup>

#### **How speech and language therapy can help: B's story**

B was a girl of 15 in the care system, known to the Youth Offending Team (YOT) and with a long history of violence and drug use. She presented to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services as highly distressed and 'hearing voices'. She was diagnosed with psychosis with a view to prescribing anti-psychotic medication. The YOT SLT worked with B, her mother, the YOT mental health worker, YOT Officer and drug worker to provide a differential diagnosis of a pre-existing Developmental Language Disorder, compounded by her drug use and Developmental Trauma.

B worked hard to understand her language disorder and that the voices she heard were in fact her own internal fragmented expressive language trying to make sense of her traumatic childhood experiences. B's distress, violence and drug use immediately decreased. She no longer reported hearing voices. Her care placement stabilised. B was empowered to participate in meetings by first explaining that she had a language disorder and how she could be helped to participate. Before this, meetings such as Care Order meetings had ended in B becoming abusive and walking out. B's diagnosis of psychosis was revised to Developmental Language Disorder with no anti-psychotic medication being prescribed, saving the NHS a significant sum through non-prescription of medication. B completed her Court Order. No repeat offending has been recorded.

## Further resources

- The intergenerational cycle of speech, language and communication needs: <http://bit.ly/RCSLTcycle>
- APPG on Speech and Language Difficulties report on the links between social disadvantage and SLCN: <http://bit.ly/2AqIMI4>
- RCSLT factsheet on the links between social disadvantage and SLCN: <http://bit.ly/2TCB1nm>

For more information, please contact [peter.just@rcslt.org](mailto:peter.just@rcslt.org)

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