



Debate on the impact of government policy on knife crime, House of Lords, 27 June 2019 Briefing by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT)

Gang violence and criminal exploitation and speech and language therapy

- The Children's Commissioner for England's February 2019 report on gang violence and criminal exploitation states that speech and language therapy was the intervention most often raised during the course of the research.¹
- Yet this month a report by the Children's Commissioner found enormous variation in reported spending on children's speech and language therapy in England, with the bottom 25% of areas spending 58p or less per child. Over half of areas reported a real-terms reduction in spending on speech and language therapy in the last three years.²

What are speech, language and communication needs and why are they relevant?

- Communication skills enable us to understand and to be understood and underpin social communication. They are central to our ability to understand and manage our emotions and to form relationships.
- Many children and young people who are excluded or at risk of exclusion have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) that are unidentified and unsupported:
 - In a study of pupils at risk of exclusion from school, two thirds were found to have SLCN.³
 - The Timpson Review of school exclusion recognises SLCN as an underlying cause of poor behaviour.⁴
- As children enter adolescence, language skills are crucial in creating and maintaining peer groups, and are used to demonstrate status, cohesion and trust. Children with difficulties establishing positive peer relations are vulnerable to developing relationships with young people who are involved in antisocial or criminal activities.⁵
- Both young people who have been excluded from school and young people with SLCN are over-represented in the criminal justice system:
 - a study of the educational background of young people in custody showed that 88% of boys and 74% of girls had been excluded from school; and 36% of boys and 41% of girls said they were 14 years or younger when they were last in education.⁶
 - at least 60% of young people in the UK who are accessing youth justice services present with communication needs which are largely unrecognized.⁷

Early identification

Sheffield Inclusion Centre supports children and young people who are displaying challenging behaviour in mainstream primary schools across the city. The Centre refers all primary-aged children on roll for assessment of their communication skills to check whether there are any underlying speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) that may be contributing to their behaviour. Between 2014 and 2018, 75 children were assessed; 63% were identified as having SLCN.

Policy recommendations

The RCSLT recommends that staff working with children and young people at risk of involvement in knife crime, including those at risk of exclusion, have access to specially commissioned speech and language therapy services. This would enable:

- **Identification** – in line with Department for Education guidance: “where there are concerns about behaviour the school should instigate an assessment to determine whether there are any underlying factors such as... difficulties with speech and language”.⁸
- **Training** – all staff working with excluded pupils or those at risk of exclusion should be trained in recognising and responding appropriately to communication needs.
- **Support** – speech and language therapy should be provided to those children and young people who need it, as well as specialist advice and support to staff working with those children and young people.

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References

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- 2 Children's Commissioner (2019). We need to talk: Access to speech and language therapy. Available online: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/cco-we-need-to-talk-june-2019.pdf>
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- 6 Murray, R. (2012). *Children and Young People in Custody 2011–12* (London: HM Inspectorate of Prisons and Youth Justice Board).
- 7 Bryan, K., Garvani, G., Gregory, J., Kilner, K. (2015). Language difficulties and criminal justice: the need for earlier identification. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 50(6), 763–775.
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