Speech, Language and Communication Challenges for Juvenile Justice

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Working with Teenagers: Visible and Invisible Problems
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Language Impairment

What are the signs?

Difficulties saying speech sounds and being understood by other people

Difficulties using language socially to communicate with others

Difficulties understanding conversations, following directions and remembering what was said

Difficulties using words and/or sentences to express ideas, thoughts, feelings, opinions
Developmental Language Disorder (DLD)

What is it?

- Language problems severe enough to interfere with daily life, poor prognosis, not associated with a clear biomedical aetiology (Bishop, 2017).
- May be primarily receptive, expressive or mixed.
- Those with diagnosis of a receptive language disorder most at risk
- Obstacles to learning, making friends and emotional well being
- DLD may co-occur with other neurodevelopmental disorders like ADHD and ASD.
Persistence and Severity

- A significant proportion of language difficulties can be **long term** even with intervention (Stothard, Snowling et al., 1998)

- Educational achievement and self-esteem is negatively impacted

- Literacy research study of students in Junior Cycle in a disadvantaged area indicated literacy several years below age level (Bizell & Foley, 2011)
Receptive Language Impairment (SRLI)

- Comprehension difficulties make children very vulnerable in relation to education (Hooper et al, 2003). Implications for self-esteem, social-communication and mental health;

- **Receptive language** (comprehension) deficits mirrored in reading comprehension and social comprehension impairments.

- Adolescents develop strategies to ‘mask’ these hidden difficulties
Impact on Teenagers
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Young Offenders

Oral Language Competence, Risk Protector/Predictor, Prevalence
• Language difficulties **rarely recognised** in young offenders and never cited as a risk predictor

• Prevalence in adolescents in custody is **much higher** than that seen in the general population, estimates ranging from 60-90% compared to 7-12%, respectively (Hughes, N. et al. 2012).

• New Zealand study identified 64% of Young Offenders had language impairment compared to 10% of youth in controls (Lount, Purdy & Hand, 2017)

• 75% of youth in a community centre in the U.K were found to have speech, language and/or communication need (SLCN) (Gregory & Bryan, 2011)
Oral Language Competence and Disadvantage

• Oral language is a key competency acquired in the first 5 years of life

• Interpersonal, academic and vocational goals are facilitated in a pro-social way which reduces the risk of offending (Snow & Powell)

• Research indicates that up to 42% of young children in disadvantaged areas of Cork city presented with language delays and impairments. This was reduced to expected estimates of up to 7-8% with early intervention

• Happy Talk is an early intervention approach which empowers parents and teachers to facilitate language development in the 0-6 year age group
Education & Exclusion

• Education is protective factor (Smart et al, 2003) and there is an over-representation of young people excluded from school

• Young people who are not in school miss opportunity to form positive peer relationships where language plays a central role

• These young people are more likely to associate with others who are involved in criminal activity (Quintin et al, 1993).
Children who start school with language difficulties are immediately disadvantaged (Snow, 2001, Locke et al. 2002)

Without age-appropriate language, literacy and numeracy skills, pupils have difficulty accessing the curriculum successfully

Low levels of language leads to literacy difficulties and lower educational achievement which are risk factors for mental health and offending (Tomblin et al, 2000)

Young offenders are a vulnerable group whose difficulties may best be understood as a compounding risk model (Bryan et al, 2015)
‘The basic motivating factor for all human social behaviour is a lifelong need for human recognition’ (Dusay & Dusay, 1989)
Co-Morbidity

• ASD clients may present with most complex presentations: low mood, challenging behaviour, severe anxiety, language and literacy disorder, eating disorder, psychosis, selective mutism

• The universal deficit in autism is an impairment in social judgement

• Social deficits that are part of ASD may mean that social anxiety is more common in this population (Chang et al, 2010)

• Challenging behaviours occur at higher rates in ASD population due to poor communication and problem-solving skills (Matson & Williams, 2013)

• Up to 45% of young offenders in UK have ADHD
Co-Morbidity

- Persistent difficulty with language and literacy development has been linked with a greater chance than normal of the development of both mental health problems and involvement in criminal activity (Clegg et al. 2005).

- A review of the literature by Benner et al. (2002) suggests that 71% of children with identified emotional and behavioural difficulties have underlying language difficulties.

- Beitchman et al. (1999) suggest that communication difficulties tend to be misinterpreted as non-compliance and conduct problems in the classroom environment.
The Court Context

Youth Justice: Young person’s experience

• Formal, unfamiliar environment
• Language demands increase in length and complexity
• Vocabulary and concepts are challenging: intention, motivation, prediction, decision making, inference
• The voice of the young person needs to be heard
The Court Context

Youth Justice: Young person’s experience

Language Difficulties impacting YP in Court (Lavigne and van Rybroek, 2011)

- Difficulty processing complex sentence
- Difficulty following directions
- Poor auditory memory & sequencing
- Restricted vocabulary
- Topic continuity
- Deficits in narrative skills
- Failure to grasp inferences
- Difficulty reading social cues
- Limited ability recognising and expressing emotions
- Deficits in higher order thinking skills involving thoughts and motives of others
- Emotional dysregulation
The Court Context

Role of the Lawyer

- Promote a fair outcome
- Support YP in understanding
  - What wrong it was alleged was committed
  - What are the key issue(s) involved
  - What defences are available to him/her
  - What are the possible consequences
- Scaffold like a teacher in supportive education
- Build bridges to understanding
- Key strategies to address deficits
- Intervention needs to be specific to the YP’s identified needs
Communication Strategies

- Engagement in face to face manner
- Neutral, gentle tone
- Address the young person by name
- Pause, wait for 10 secs at least, Listen
- Speak slowly & use simple vocabulary
- Repeat key information
- Use concrete language, avoiding abstract constructs involving inference
- Allow YP to tell or draw their story
- Choose questions carefully - not too many
- Avoid tag questions and negative statements e.g. “you didn’t do that, did you?”
- Open Questions involve what happened, how, why, where. Closed Questions are easier (who, what, where, when)
- Time concepts are difficult (involving before and after)
Communication Strategies

Resources & Tools
Communication Strategies

Visual Schedules for understanding & predictability
Communication Strategies

Resources & Tools

Receptive Language / Comprehension
Communication Strategies

Resources & Tools

Restricted vocabulary Code
Communication Strategies

Resources & Tools

Comic Strips & Speech Bubbles for thinking

Doodle with purpose

No art skills required!

Provide something for eyes to focus on

Listening can be hard. Try stick people and key words. Speech and thought bubbles. They give a shared, concrete focus for your conversation.

Post-it note comic strips can help sort out a muddled sequence of events.
Communication Strategies

Resources & Tools

Comic Strips & Speech Bubbles for thinking
Communication Strategies

Observe - Wait - Notice - Respond - Adapt

Resources & Tools
Communication Strategies

Resources & Tools
Children need to understand and be understood

• Strengths and challenges - tailor language to the appropriate level of understanding

• Effective communication the bedrock of the legal process

• Is it possible to have a fair trial without a language profile?
Recommendations

- Up to date assessment report with a profile of Young Person and a signposting for future
- Verbal intermediary who can interpret reports and young person, guide and support in court.
- Training for professionals involved in the justice system
- Research base in Ireland to promote better outcomes
References


• Hughes, N. et al. (2012) Nobody made the connection; the prevalence of neurodisability in young people who offend. London: Office for the Children’s Commissioner.


• www.talkingtroublenz.org