

Speech and language therapists supporting pupils in alternative provision

Many children and young people in alternative provision settings have speech, language and communication needs which were not identified prior to entering the setting. This includes pupils who have been excluded from mainstream schools, as well as pupils who require alternative provision due to their physical or mental health needs.

What are speech, language and communication needs?

Speech, language and communication needs are considered to be a hidden disability, because they are often not immediately obvious. A person with speech, language and communication needs may have difficulties understanding and remembering what is said to them; explaining and expressing themselves; or following the 'rules' of social interaction. Most children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) will have some level of communication need, including those with social, emotional and mental health needs.

Sheffield Inclusion Centre supports children and young people who are displaying challenging behaviour and have been excluded from mainstream primary and secondary schools across the city. Between 2014 and 2018 all children on roll were assessed by speech and language therapy; 63% had speech, language and communication needs.



The size of the issue

- **Two thirds** of pupils at risk of permanent exclusion from a mainstream secondary school have language difficulties.¹
- **81%** of children with formally identified emotional and behavioural disorders have significantly below average language abilities.²
- **77.1%** of children in alternative provision (AP) academies, AP free schools and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) in England have an identified SEN or disability.³

A serious issue

Without support, communication needs can impact on pupils in alternative provision in a variety of important ways:

- **Education:** Communication needs can prevent pupils from engaging with lessons which are delivered through spoken language, as well as cause difficulties with aspects of school life such as following timetables and completing homework.
- **Relationships:** Communication needs can make it more difficult for pupils to form friendships, and put them at greater risk of peer problems and bullying.^{4,5}
- **Behaviour:** Speech, language and communication needs are recognised as an underlying cause of poor behaviour in the Government-commissioned Timpson Review of School Exclusion.⁶
- **Interventions:** Children with communication needs may struggle to engage with interventions which are verbally delivered, such as anger management and cognitive behavioural therapy, unless they are adapted.⁷

Having unsupported communication needs also puts young people at increased risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system, where two thirds of young people have low language skills.⁸

Jack's story

Jack was in Year 5 when he was excluded from school after his peers dared him to engage in inappropriate sexual behaviour. This was out of character, but he wanted to be accepted by his peers. Jack was the only one excluded, as he was unable to argue a convincing defence.

At the pupil referral unit, Jack was seen by the speech and language therapist who recognised signs of autism and initiated a diagnosis. Jack subsequently received a diagnosis of autism which helped the adults supporting him to be aware of his social vulnerability. Jack has now joined a new mainstream school, and has settled in well.

How speech and language therapy can help

Speech and language therapists (SLTs) working in AP settings can help to achieve better outcomes for children and young people by providing:

- **Assessments:** SLTs undertake detailed assessments of pupils' speech, language and communication needs. This helps other staff to understand how to meet the pupils' needs, as well as supporting reintegration back into mainstream provision by advising the school on how to support the pupils' needs.
- **Training and advice:** SLTs provide staff training to increase understanding of communication needs. They also provide individual advice on how to differentiate teaching or interventions to make them accessible to a young person's unique strengths and needs.
- **Direct support:** SLTs deliver evidence-based interventions to maximise pupils' communication potential.
- **Communication-supportive environments:** SLTs advise settings on how to develop a communication-friendly environment that maximises opportunities and removes barriers.



Sam's story

Sam moved to alternative provision after experiencing anxiety coping with mainstream secondary school, where she became overwhelmed by teachers' instructions, unpredictable timetable changes and complex teenage friendships.

At the AP, a speech and language therapist supported Sam to plan how she could manage difficult social situations and prepare for transition meetings, including how to outline the reasonable adjustments she would need during transition.

Sam is now fully integrated back into mainstream secondary school, and hopes to become a lecturer.

► For further information, please contact info@rcslt.org

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Also see our factsheets on **Behaviour** and **Promoting social, emotional and mental health**

REFERENCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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⁶ Department for Education (2019). Timpson Review of School Exclusion. [Online] Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807862/Timpson_review.pdf

⁷ Snow, P. (2013). Language competence: A hidden disability in antisocial behaviour. *InPsych*. June 2013. Available at: <https://www.psychology.org.au/publications/inpsych/2013/june/snow/>

⁸ Bryan, K., Freer, J. and Furlong, C. (2007). Language and Communication Difficulties in Juvenile Offenders. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 42(5), 505-520.

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