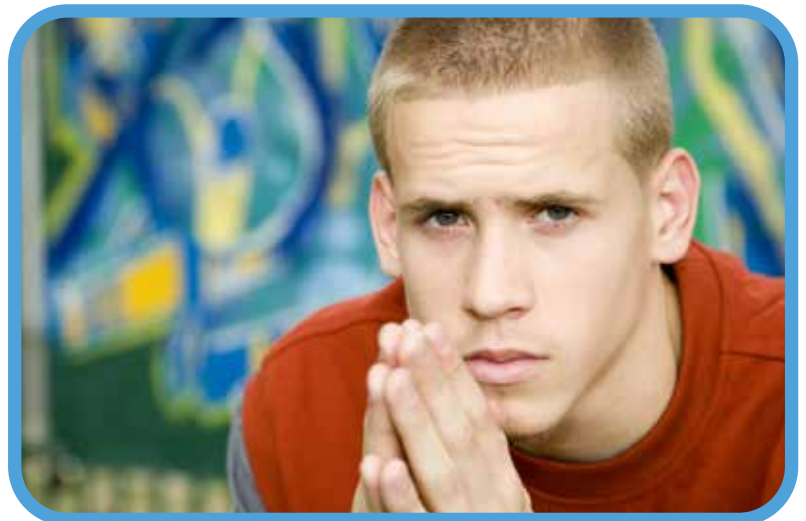


Supporting children and young people in the justice system

Many young people in contact with the criminal justice system have unidentified speech, language and communication needs¹. Those who enter the youth justice system often do so from settings where there is a heightened risk of having communication needs². If these needs are not recognised and addressed early on, young people will be left without the critical support needed to navigate and engage with what is a very complex system with its own rules, regimes and demands, with the risk of further reoffending³.

The size of the issue

- Over **60%** of young people in contact with the youth justice system have difficulties with speech, language or communication⁴.
- The Youth Justice Board found that in one year, **71%** of children sentenced had speech, language and communication concerns⁵.
- However, only around **5%** of young people with communication needs have their needs identified before entering the youth justice system⁶.
- **40%** of young people in contact within the justice system find it difficult to access and benefit from verbal interventions and programmes⁷.



What are speech, language and communication needs?

Speech, language and communication needs may be hidden and not immediately obvious. Young people can become adept at hiding their difficulties and good surface language skills can mask their difficulties⁸. As a result, the significance of communication needs is often overlooked.

What's the impact of speech, language and communication needs?

Young people with communication needs may have difficulty:

1. communicating with others. This may be because they struggle to express themselves or have difficulty remembering and understanding what is being said to them.
2. recalling information and sequencing information to tell a story. This is paramount in police interviews and in court⁹.
3. understanding frequently used criminal justice terms, such as 'comply', 'remorse' and 'breach'¹⁰.
4. altering their communication style to suit different audiences. This can make young people appear as bored, rude or lacking co-operation¹¹. 80% of magistrates said that the attitude and demeanour of a young person influences their sentencing decision¹².
5. participating in youth crime interventions and programmes which are verbally mediated¹³. The verbal context makes information and support difficult to access.
6. comprehending restorative approaches and processes. Young people are less able to think about the impact on others and communicate their view¹⁴.
7. telling the time and understanding the concept of time. This can lead to missed appointments and the risk of breaching their community order¹⁵.
8. expressing their feelings and emotions and relating to others in socially acceptable/appropriate ways¹⁶.
9. understanding what is required of them in their out-of-court disposal, order or sentence¹⁷. This can jeopardise their compliance with court orders and instructions.



How speech and language therapy can help

Speech and language therapists work directly with young people with speech, language and communication needs, as well as supporting the staff, and wider workforce around the young person¹⁸.

- **Direct work:** detailed assessment; provision of therapy individually or in groups.
- **Working with the wider team:** training staff; tailoring written and verbal information and interventions; providing advice to staff on how to engage with young people¹⁹.

The Youth Justice Board's Case Management Guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/case-management-guidance>) and the Healthcare Standards for Young People in Secure Settings (<https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/healthcare-standards-children-young-people-secure-settings>) both highlight referral and access to speech and language therapy.

Benefits of speech and language therapy in the youth justice system

For staff

- Increased knowledge and understanding of the barriers to engagement and how to overcome them.
- Increased range of strategies to support communication.
- Materials and interventions are tailored to make them accessible.

For young people

- Better understand what is happening to them, the court, their order and what is required of them, with increased participation and engagement.
- Their vulnerabilities are better identified. This minimises the risk of child criminal exploitation and child sexual exploitation.
- Successful completion of rehabilitation and treatment programmes, which helps improve their educational and employment prospects on release.
- Increased self-esteem, confidence and self-identify for the individual.

Alex's story

Alex* is 16. He received a 7-month referral order from the courts for an assault and possession to supply drugs. Alex lives between his parents who are separated. He had a heroin exposed pregnancy, was hospitalised with meningitis at 3 months and had a history of social care involvement.

Alex was diagnosed with ADHD when he was 6 years old, and at the time of the referral to the Youth Justice Service (YJS) he was self-medicating using cannabis. Alex had a history of school exclusions and attended a primary pupil referral unit in year 6, where he received an education health and care plan (EHCP) for Social Emotional and Mental Health. (SEMH). He intermittently attended 3 mainstream secondary schools, before he stopped attending in year 9.

Alex was initially reluctant to attend his YJS appointments saying that he didn't trust professionals and had always been let down. Following an AssetPlus screening, Alex was referred for a SLCN assessment. This revealed that he had an unidentified developmental language disorder (DLD) and social communication difficulties. Alex agreed to attend weekly sessions to develop skills and strategies in the following areas: emotional regulation, comprehension monitoring, problem solving and consequential thinking, telling the time and learning the months and developing his confidence in social situations.

At the end of his order, Alex and his parents said speech and language therapy input had enabled him to build trust, develop his language and communication skills and re-engage in education. They reported there had been no further instances of him damaging property in the home, smoking cannabis or re-offending.

**Alex is an anonymised name.*

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists recommends:

- Speech and language therapists must be provided in all youth justice teams and young offender institutions. This includes providing assessment and interventions, both direct and indirect, to support the young people who need it.
- All staff working with those who offend should receive training to help them to recognise and support young people with speech, language and communication needs. We recommend that all staff should complete The Box communication training.

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