

# Speaking out

## young offenders with communication difficulties



*“I have to admit that in all the years I have been looking at prisons and the treatment of offenders, I have never found anything so capable of doing so much for so many people at so little cost as the work that speech and language therapists carry out.”*

**Lord Ramsbotham** former Chief Inspector of Prisons (October 2006)

### The links between poor communication skills and offending

Speech and literacy difficulties are significant risk factors for offending. The prison population has high numbers of people with learning difficulties, hearing problems and mental health problems.

A 2003 Polmont Young Offenders Institute survey found 70% of young men had significant communication problems.

Half the UK prison population has been identified as having literacy difficulties. Home Office studies have shown around 35% of offenders only have speaking and listening skills at a basic level. A third of children with speech and language difficulties develop mental health problems with resulting criminal involvement in many cases.

Communication difficulties are more common among children from disadvantaged backgrounds – as high as 55% in some areas of deprivation.

If problems are not addressed early, the relationship between poor communication skills, exclusion from education, social deprivation and descent into criminality is reinforced.

### The value of speech and language therapy in crime prevention and reducing re-offending

People with speech, language and communication needs have a higher rate of re-offending (Linares Orama, 2005).

Speech and language therapy intervention, to improve individuals' communication skills, makes a positive impact on the population.

Improving literacy and social skills is essential to reducing re-offending.

Speech and language therapy targeted at improving the language skills of individuals can significantly reduce the number who go on to re-offend.

Although the Government has provided an estimated £130m for education to improve literacy skills, anger management and drug rehabilitation courses, studies show nearly two-thirds of offenders are unable to benefit fully from these programmes because of their poor language skills.

Investing in speech and language therapy will enable young people to benefit from programmes of support in prisons and young offenders institutions.

**Lord Ramsbotham**  
former Chief Inspector of Prisons  
(October 2006)

“When I went to the young offender establishment at Polmont I was walking with the governor, who told me that if, by some mischance, he had to get rid of all his staff, the last one out of the gate would be his speech and language therapist”

**Frank Flynn**  
Governor HM YOI Werrington

“Speech and language therapy enables us to address concerns about speech and understanding that in the past have been masked because a lad was simply badly behaved. To refer a lad who appears not to understand what he is told can have a very positive effect in moderating his future behaviour”

**Jane Mackenzie**  
RCSLT England Policy Officer

“The work of speech and language therapists addresses the oral language needs of young offenders and empowers them to improve their life chances”

## Speech and language therapy helps young offenders to:

- Improve non-verbal communication skills expressed in, for example, body language
- Develop language skills for daily life
- Take part in a conversation
- Develop their vocabulary and the way they put sentences together
- Use techniques to express their feelings and emotions
- Deal with the triggers that spark anti-social behaviour
- Find ways to overcome drug-related short-term memory problems
- Deal with authority figures, eg coping at interview
- Understand and be understood by prison/YOI staff
- Cope better with the social challenges faced in institutional life, eg using pictures to support understanding of the written word

**Because speech and language therapy pinpoints the specific communication needs of young offenders, they can develop their language skills in a short space of time and dramatically reduce their risk of re-offending**

### Types of communication difficulties

Young offenders with communication problems have difficulty:

- **Expressing** themselves through speaking, writing or non-verbal communication
- **Understanding** the spoken or written word, body language and facial expressions
- **Listening** to what is being said to them
- **Remembering** the information they are given
- **Expressing** their feelings and emotions in an appropriate way, eg they may use violence instead of words to express themselves
- **Relating** to others in socially acceptable ways

### Speech and language therapy support

A two-year study at Werrington and Brinsford YOIs demonstrates the value of speech and language therapy. Nearly two-thirds of juvenile offenders who underwent a screening process were identified as having difficulties with speech, language and communication.

Speech and language therapy support was provided in the areas of assessment and diagnosis of communication difficulties; programmes of one-to-one, group and joint therapy; and staff training and support, to increase awareness of communication difficulties and the effect these have on the management of young offenders.

As a result, SLTs became “vital staff members”. The introduction of speech and language therapy made an “enormous impact” particularly in the delivery of the learning and skills. Speech and language therapy was “entirely beneficial both to staff and trainees alike”.

**For more information, including a full list of references, please contact:**

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