ROYAL COLLEGE OF SPEECH & LANGUAGE THERAPISTS

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)

There are significant economic costs involved in failing children with language and communication difficulties. If problems are not addressed early, the spiral of disadvantage deepens.

Young people with communication needs have lower educational attainment.

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

Low education, speech and literacy difficulties are 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.

A third of children with speech and language difficulties develop mental health problems with resulting criminal involvement in many cases.

Half the UK prison population has been identified as having literacy difficulties and Home Office studies have shown around 35% of offenders only have speaking and listening skills at a basic level.

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

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 prison education to improve literacy skills, and provide anger management and drug rehabilitation courses, studies show nearly two-thirds of offenders are unable to access these programmes because of their poor language skills.

Money would be better spent on providing speech and language therapy, so that young people can benefit from prison education programmes.

A national study carried out in 2001/2002 showed that the recidivism rates fell by as much as 50% for individuals who received targeted speech and language therapy to improve their oral language skills in their first year after release.

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 body language and non-verbal skills
- Develop language skills for daily life
- Take part in a conversation, by appreciating turn taking
- 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 staff
- Survive prison 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

How speech and language therapy helps

A two-year study demonstrated the value of speech and language therapy in young offenders' institutions.

Nearly two-thirds of juvenile offenders who underwent a screening process were identified as having difficulties with speech, language and communication.

In the study, speech and language therapy support was provided in the areas of:

- Assessment and diagnosis of communication difficulties
- One-to-one, group and joint therapy programmes
- Staff training and support, to increase their awareness of communication difficulties and the effect these have on the management of young offenders

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

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