



Dave Mahon wants to raise awareness of communication difficulties

TALKING...

A WAY OUT OF TROUBLE

Being able to communicate is a skill that we often take for granted. It is a skill that enables us to express what we want or like, to interact with others and build relationships.

However, research has shown that as many as 60% of young people in the youth justice system have communication needs – significantly higher than the general population. What does this mean? Well, it means that a significant proportion of young people in the system will have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) and have difficulty in articulating themselves, in understanding what is being said to them or in understanding social rules.

For some, these issues may be minor or temporary while for others their needs will be complex and long term. A young person's SLCN may also be part of another condition such as dyslexia, learning disabilities or autism spectrum disorder. Importantly, many of these young people may not even know they have these needs or may have, either consciously or subconsciously, developed strategies to hide them. Equally importantly, the adults they interact with may also be unaware.

So am I saying that these needs are the cause of a young person's offending behaviour. No, the reasons why young people offend are complex but these needs can contribute to offending behaviour (for example, not fully understanding the effect of their actions) and make it much more difficult for a young person to escape the system once they find themselves in it. We are not looking to excuse criminal behaviour but consider that where a young person is supported to better articulate themselves they have a much better chance of escaping the system, building more meaningful relationships with other people and building a better life for themselves.

Consequences of misunderstanding

Illustrative of the kinds of issues young people can have in a court setting is an example told to me by a speech and language therapist (SLT) for a youth offending team. The SLT escorted a young person to a court appearance and witnessed the following exchange as part of the proceedings:

Magistrate: 'Do you have any remorse for what you did?'

Young person (defendant): 'No.'

This isn't another tabloid example of Britain's feral youth. There is more to it. Following the appearance the young person asked the SLT a fairly revealing question: 'What does remorse mean?'

Remorse is a word most of us understand but we sometimes forget that the level of language that we are comfortable with may not be the same for some young people. Simple mistakes like this – a young person not understanding or not wanting to show they don't understand – can potentially have significant repercussions.

The young people we have spoken to underline how they can struggle:

'I try really hard in court but it's difficult for me to concentrate.'

'I really need help to understand what I have to do on my order, it's really confusing.'

'It's useless sending me letters because I can hardly read.'

'Sometimes I sit and listen, but I'm not really hearing. I forget what they've said.'

'I can't find the words, I run out of words.'



MANY OF THESE YOUNG PEOPLE MAY NOT EVEN KNOW THEY HAVE THESE NEEDS

Working for improvement

The Communication Trust is a consortium of 40 charities who work towards ensuring that young people with communication needs are better supported and that the children's workforce have access to information and skills to better support the young people they work with. The Trust's youth justice programme is designed to help support everyone who works within the youth justice system to better identify SLCN and better support young people in all aspects of communication. The Trust's *Sentence Trouble* booklet and website www.sentencetrouble.info helps to explain in more detail what communication needs are and how they can affect a young person, how you can help to identify these needs, and how supporting these needs can result in better outcomes for both the young person and the staff who work with them.

The resources highlight simple ways of supporting young people, for example, in a court context you could perhaps think about the language you use. Simplifying the language or ensuring that you explain what certain more complex words mean can help a young person understand and feel more engaged in the process. Similarly, checking that a young person understands what you are telling them, giving them a little time to process information and speaking a little more slowly than you usually do can all help young people to understand and engage more.

Dave Mahon is the Programme Manager for The Communication Trust.