Giving Voice™ | Speech and Language Therapy transforms lives

ROYAL COLLEGE OF SPEECH & LANGUAGE THERAPISTS

Supporting looked after children

Many looked after children have unidentified speech, language and communication needs. These include difficulties both understanding language (making sense of what people say) and using language (words and sentences). Speech and language therapy plays a crucial role in identifying and meeting communication needs. It helps looked after children and those around them to communicate with each other and supports relationship building, educational attainment and future life chances.

Looked after children and communication needs

Some looked after children's communication needs may be associated with their environment. The majority of children in care experience conditions of poverty and social disadvantage[1] and in areas of high social deprivation between 40% and 56% of children start school with limited language.[2,3]

Attachment difficulties and any previous abuse, neglect and subsequent trauma may also have had an impact on the development of looked after children's communication skills.[4]

Communication needs may be the result of developmental language disorder[5] or associated with other conditions, such as autism spectrum disorder and learning disability, or co-occur with them, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and conduct disorder,[6,7,8] complex needs, and profound and multiple learning disabilities.

The impact of communication needs

Looked after children with communication needs can have difficulty understanding what is being said to and asked of them. They can also have difficulty making themselves understood. Communication needs are often hidden and older children in particular may have developed masking techniques for these needs. Some looked after children communicate through behaviour that may result in offending behaviour.

Common difficulties looked after children experience include social communication skills, naming and managing emotions (including self-control), self-awareness, vocabulary, concepts related to time, working memory and the ability to retain, process, recall and sequence information.

The size of the problem

- There were more than **93,000** children in care in the United Kingdom in 2015.[9]
- Severe and pervasive communication impairment, much of it previously unidentified, has been found in children and young people in residential care.[10]
- Looked after children with a range of needs, including communication needs, are overrepresented in the care and criminal justice system[11] and HM Inspectorate of Prisons and the Youth Justice Board found that nearly a third of young men in young offender institutions had been looked after by a local authority at some point.[12]
- No Wrong Door, the service for looked after children in North Yorkshire, found **62%** of its looked after children had communication needs. Only two of the children had previously seen a speech and language therapist (SLT).[13]
- **£17 billion** per year is spent in England and Wales by the state on the cost of late intervention – the largest individual cost (£5.3 billion) is spent on looked after children.[14]

▶ For more information, please contact:
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How speech and language therapy services can help

Speech and language therapy plays a crucial role in identifying and supporting looked after children's communication needs. It helps looked after children to express their views, wishes and feelings. It helps those supporting looked after children to communicate effectively with them, including through adjusting their communication and listening style. This has a range of benefits:

- **PROMOTING POSITIVE OUTCOMES** – it promotes social, emotional and mental health and wellbeing and future life chances by helping to remove barriers to forming attachments and relationships and supports education, training, future employment, and participation in society. It supports looked after children through transitions.
- **REDUCING THE RISK OF NEGATIVE OUTCOMES** – it supports staff to manage behaviour verbally and calm potentially risky situations rather than having to resort to physical intervention. It also reduces the risk of communication needs leading to negative consequences, including involvement in the criminal justice system.

Recommendations

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists recommends that the team supporting looked after children has access to specially commissioned speech and language therapy services. This would enable:

- **SCREEN** – children and young people should be screened for communication needs when they enter care, including referral to speech and language therapy services for a full assessment where the screen has identified this is necessary to support differential diagnosis.
- **TRAIN** – those working with, caring for, and supporting looked after children should be trained in awareness of communication and interaction needs and how to respond to them so that the places where they spend most of their time, school and home, are able to meet their needs.
- **SUPPORT** – direct speech and language therapy should be provided to those looked after children who need it.

It would also enable appropriate speech and language therapy input into edge of care meetings, health and education assessments, and looked after children reviews. This would help ensure that decisions about looked after children's care and support were informed by specialist advice on the different types and often hidden nature of communication needs, and their potential impact on understanding.

Child A's story

Child A is 15. Prior to her present placement, she had had 20 previous placement breakdowns. With a history of aggressive behaviour, including being verbally and physically abusive, she started her placement on a 3:1 staffing ratio due to the risk of assaulting staff. She had a large number of police charges pending. She had previously been identified as having no obvious difficulties with her ability to communicate, but that she would communicate emotion by behaviour.

Following staff concern about her communication skills and inability to understand information, an SLT undertook a full assessment of Child A. This revealed that she had a range of unidentified speech, language and communication needs. The SLT advised both Child A and those working with her how best to support her communication needs, including when attending court.

As a result of this speech and language therapy input, Child A's communication, social skills and behaviour have improved and the charges against her have been dropped. Staffing levels have been reduced to 2:1 and 1:1 support is being trialled at school. Her social worker commented, 'What I have experienced is Child A's much improved confidence in expressing herself, listening and understanding. This has been an invaluable part of the progress she has made in placement and has allowed her greater opportunities to make meaningful relationships with adults and peers alike.'

▶ Also see our factsheets on **'Safeguarding'** and **'Social, emotional and mental health'**

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