The problem

Oral communication difficulties have been identified in over 60% of young people in the criminal justice system in Australia and the UK (Bryan, Freer and Furlong, 2007, Bryan et al, 2004, Snow, Powell & Sanger 2012). This poses many problems for youth and their whānau, but also impacts on the services working with them. Both sides can have problems with communication.

Young people may misunderstand what is said by police, lawyers, youth justice staff, CYF staff and many others. These adults may believe the young people understand and therefore adopt a communication style which is too complex. It can also be difficult for young people to clearly explain what they mean. This is often judged to be reluctance, obstructive or unmotivated behaviour or a lack of intelligence. Young people may not be aware of their own communication problems, or may be aware but cover them up. These difficulties with communication may go undetected and are often not obvious to either side.

Consequences

Poor communication skills impact hugely on young people’s involvement in the youth justice system. Consequences can be:

- poor interactions with the police and other community services resulting in arrest
- inability to give a good account of themselves resulting in a charge
- poor understanding of legal process and instructions e.g. appointment requirements, court orders, remand and probation arrangements
- poor interaction with youth justice staff
- inability to benefit from intervention programmes as most of these involve talking.

See Tania’s story and Mark’s story (taken from the Sentence Trouble booklet) on page 3.

What can be done about it?

There has been some recognition in New Zealand of the difficulties some young people in the youth justice sector have with literacy. Oral language difficulties have not received any such recognition. This is a problem.

The ‘Talking Trouble’ NZ Project is a collaboration between three speech-language therapists (SLTs) passionate about improving New Zealand’s performance in this area. We have been inspired by the excellent work currently being done in the UK and Australia led by Professor Karen Bryan and Professor Pamela Snow. This has been supported in the UK by House of Lords member and former Chief Inspector of Prisons, Lord Ramsbotham. The ‘Sentence Trouble’ project run by The Communication Trust has spearheaded a number of initiatives including information videos, training courses and booklets for staff. A number of local authorities in the UK have begun providing SLT services in the youth justice sector.

The ‘Talking Trouble’ NZ Project has been established to raise awareness of these issues, investigate the extent of the problem in New Zealand and develop interventions appropriate to Aotearoa.
Project Update

Project team

Dr Linda Hand is a senior lecturer in the School of Psychology Speech Language Therapy Programme at the University of Auckland. She specialises in speech and language difficulties in children and cultural and linguistic diversity issues in SLT.

Dr Clare McCann is a lecturer in the School of Psychology Speech Language Therapy Programme at the University of Auckland. She specialises in speech and language difficulties in adults and quality of life issues in communication disorders.

Sally Kedge is a speech language therapist involved in clinical and research work concerning the language profiles of young people with social emotional and behavioural difficulties.

UK meetings

In June 2012 Sally Kedge visited the UK and met with the Sentence Trouble manager, Dave Mahon. This was incredibly helpful. He has been very generous with providing information and support and has encouraged us to freely access Sentence Trouble resources. Sally also met with Dr Helen Stringer at the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne which increased our motivation to pursue this Project. Her years of experience in both intervention and research with young offenders was inspirational.

Local meetings

• In July 2012 Linda Hand attended the first Youth Justice Practice Forum established by Associate Professor Ian Lambie in Auckland. Linda raised the issue of communication difficulties and young offenders with panelists at the forum.
• In October 2012 Linda and Sally gave a presentation at the SYPHANZ (Society of Youth Health Care Professionals Aotearoa New Zealand) conference. They were invited to present further at the 2013 SYPHANZ conference.

New Zealand research

• An application for a PhD project through The University of Auckland investigating the incidence of oral communication difficulties in youth in the criminal justice system in New Zealand has been submitted. (This is intended to be very similar to Pamela Snow’s project in Australia.)
• Data collection for a University of Auckland Masters research project investigating the language skills of youth in a CYF youth justice facility is about to commence.
• Caralyn Purvis at the University of Canterbury is a speech language therapist conducting doctoral research looking at the communication needs of staff working with young offenders.

We are very grateful for their input.

Advisors

Members of the ‘Talking Trouble’ NZ team have engaged with a number of international and local advisors to develop the Project’s framework and scope. These have included:

• Judge Andrew Becroft
• Professor Karen Bryan
• Assoc. Professor Pam Snow
• Health providers working in youth justice
• SLTs in disability, health and education sectors and private practice
• Psychologists
• Psychology researchers, Assoc. Professor Ian Lambie, Professor Fred Seymour, Dr John Read.
• Staff at Youth Justice CYF facility
• New Zealand Speech Language Therapists Association
• Royal College of Speech Language Therapists
Upcoming events

Youth Justice Practice Forum 23 November 2012

‘Talking Trouble’ NZ will be presenting at the second Youth Justice Practice Forum, on 23 November 2012, 1:00 – 4:00 pm, Tamaki Campus, Auckland.

Free parking and no cost for attendance. This presentation will introduce the ‘Talking Trouble’ NZ Project to a wide audience of practitioners in the youth justice area.


Developments in the field

The UK has just approved intermediary services for defendants. This follows on from intermediary services for child witnesses in courts which were developed over ten years ago, primarily carried out by SLTs. In New Zealand in October 2011, Cabinet approved justice reforms which included the provision of ‘specialist intermediaries’ for child witnesses in court. However, this has not yet been instituted, and intermediary services for child defendants have not yet been considered here.

Tania’s story

Tania was arrested and questioned by police about an incident. However she could not follow what the police were asking her and she was particularly confused by their complicated vocabulary. She subsequently gave a statement to police that contained many contradictions and appeared unconvincing. Although the statement was read back to her, she couldn’t process and remember the large amounts of verbal information adequately to identify whether or not it was what she had said. She signed the statement anyway because she wanted to get home quicker. During later discussions with Tania she claimed that the police had “set her up”.

Mark’s story

Mark had the terms of his order explained to him by a YOT (youth offending team) staff member. Mark had no understanding of his order and the requirements it contained due to the complexity of the language. Mark has a low level of reading ability and although he was given a written copy of his order he was unable to understand the document. The YOT member did try to put the information into more simple terms but this added to greater confusion and overload. Mark had to sign to say he agreed with the actions that would take place in order to complete his order; he signed the document even though he really didn’t understand it.

Tania’s story and Mark’s story are taken from the Communication Trust’s Sentence Trouble booklet which can be found here: http://www.sentencetrouble.info/resources
Plans for the future
The following diagram represents the framework and scope of the ‘Talking Trouble’ NZ Project.

In order to achieve this, we have three immediate steps:
1. seek funding
2. establish a dedicated website and
3. maintain and further develop our networks.

How can I be involved?
Email to join our mailing list / become a friend of the ‘Talking Trouble’ NZ Project
Send this newsletter on to others

Disclaimer: This is not an official publication of The University of Auckland. The ‘Talking Trouble’ NZ Project does not at this point offer any assessment or intervention services so cannot accept referrals or comment on any individual cases. To the best of our knowledge the information in this newsletter is up to date and accurate.