

Speaking up for young offenders

COMMUNICATION DISORDER is the most common disability seen in childhood. Left untreated, communication difficulties can lead to poor social skills, behavioural problems and even mental health problems. One third of children with communication difficulties will go on to develop mental illness if left untreated, and over half will eventually be involved in criminal activity. In fact, Dr Karen Bryan, Head of the Division of Health and Social Care at the University of Surrey, and her colleagues have shown that at least 60 per cent of young people in custody have difficulties with speech, language and communication.

So what can be done to help those with communication disorders who are at risk of turning to crime? It has been well researched that early treatment can help children overcome their communication difficulties before they develop into a more complex and severe problem.

Building on this, Dr Bryan and Jane McKenzie, from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, have recently put together a report to recommend specific, practical ways that treatment and support could be offered to help these young people as early as possible.

The report makes a range of recommendations to tackle this issue. Firstly through prevention: they suggest that children and young people at risk should be given speech and language support in schools, inclusion programmes and youth



60%

Amount of young people in custody with speech and language difficulties

offending teams before they get into serious difficulties. Secondly, for support to be offered to young offenders once they are in the criminal justice system, since communication difficulties often mean that these

young people struggle to understand the process and its implications. Finally, the report suggests that more support is needed in helping young people who have been in custody adjust to living in their community again without reoffending.

Whether these recommendations will be taken forward remains to be seen. What's clear is that much more can be done to help this group of vulnerable young people and the communities that they are a part of, and the work of Dr Bryan and her colleagues will certainly draw attention to a potential solution. >|