

Communicating with Young People with Learning Disabilities

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Young people with learning disabilities are at risk of being disadvantaged in the youth justice and criminal justice systems if they do not have the right support. The purpose of this information sheet is to provide basic information in relation to effective communication for anyone working with a young person with a learning disability, who is either in the youth justice system, or is at risk of offending.

Unlike a learning difficulty (which in the UK includes dyslexia and ADHD/ADD), a learning disability is a protected characteristic for the purpose of the Equality Act 2010. A learning disability also has grounds for detention under the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003. Diagnosis of a learning disability therefore has significant legal implications.

Effective Communication

Communication is a basic human right. Communication is the means through which we control our existence. Learning disabilities are largely defined by problems with some or all forms of communication. This can include speaking and listening, understanding spoken and written communication, understanding body language, as well as explaining or expressing thoughts and feelings.

Some people also have problems remembering things or concentrating for long periods of time. Experiencing communication difficulties can make a person significantly more disadvantaged in the youth and criminal justice systems. If the person is not able to communicate when they are asked questions or in important meetings, they can become frustrated and react negatively. This can then affect how they are treated by others, including influencing important sentencing or assessment decisions.

There is no quick fix for dealing with communication difficulties. Each individual has a unique set of abilities, experience and opportunities. Assessment is vital in ensuring that the most effective means of communication is developed on an individual basis. Everyone has the right to control their existence through the recognition and meeting of their communication needs. Different ways of communicating should be equally valued and accepted.

Practical Tips and Techniques

'People with Learning Disabilities and the Criminal Justice System' (Scottish Government, 2011) outlined that to communicate well with young people with a learning disability practitioners need to understand the difficulties that someone with a learning disability may have. They may need to change the way they communicate. They should always try and respond to each person's individual communication needs. Advice about how best

to communicate and interact with a particular individual can often be given by family, carers or professionals involved in giving support. It also identified the following practical tips and techniques:

- To help to improve communication with young people with a learning disability it's important to take time to **establish rapport** with the young person and may be helpful to use the person's name at the start of each sentence. Someone with a learning disability is less likely to communicate at their best if they are anxious. Remember to always speak **clearly** and **slowly**, using **plain language** and **avoid jargon**. Explain any technical words to the person and ensure they understand things before moving on.
- Encourage the young person to let you know if they don't understand something. The use of **visual aids** such as drawings, photos, a calendar for dates can be helpful. It is important to **emphasise key words** and to use concrete, not abstract, terms, for example 'at breakfast time' rather than 'early on'. Break large chunks of information into **smaller chunks** and ensure you give the person **time** to understand the information.
- Be **patient** and **calm** while communicating, **don't rush** the person you are talking to, as they may **need longer** to process the questions and think about their answers. Try to use **open-ended questions** rather than closed (restricting) 'yes/no' questions and **avoid double-negative statements** or vague questions such as 'you weren't in the shop, were you'?
- Be aware that a young person with a learning disability may be **eager to please** (likely to answer yes). Repeating the same question may also **suggest** to the young person that they have given the **wrong answer**. In these situations, this can be checked by asking the same question in a **different way** where you may expect a negative answer. This is particularly useful in checking that the young person has **understood** the question.
- Finally, try to have interviews in a **familiar environment** and avoid changing the interview room. Ensuring the environment is free from **distracting noises** and that it is as **calm** as possible will help **reduce anxiety**. Wherever possible, several **short interviews** or sessions are likely to be better than one long session as this may help with the young person's concentration levels.

SOLD (Supporting Offenders with Learning Disabilities) worked in collaboration with CYCJ to help produce 'The Young Person's Journey', an online resource for young people, their families and professionals working in the youth and criminal justice system. This provides information on the pathways through the criminal justice system and Children's Hearing System for young people who offend.

This information sheet was produced in conjunction with 'The SOLD Network'.

References:

The Criminal Justice Pathway, for People with Learning Disabilities, Challenges and opportunities for change (2015). ARC Scotland.

People with Learning Disabilities and the Criminal Justice System (2011). Scottish Government.

Positive Practice Positive Outcomes (2010), Department of Health.

Useful Links:

[People First Scotland](#)

[CYCJ practice guidance: Speech, Language and Communication Needs](#)

arcuk.org.uk/scotland/

www.gov.scot/resource/doc/346993/0115487.pdf

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