The Communication Trust
Every child understood

Sentence Trouble

This booklet has been developed by The Communication Trust, The Dyslexia SpLD Trust and the Autism Education Trust as a result of the Department of Health and the Department of Children, Schools and Families *Better Communication Action Plan.*

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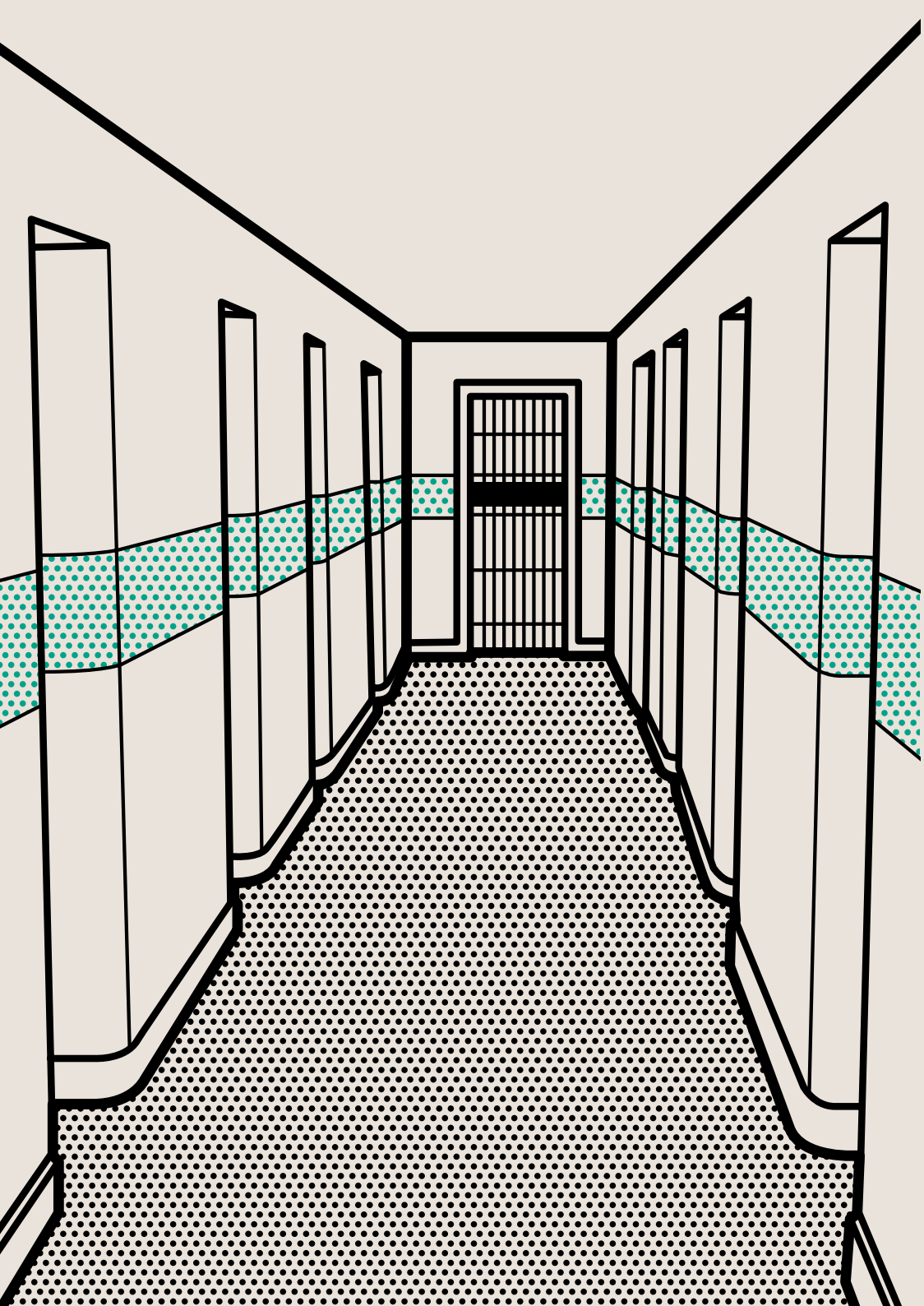

Why should I read this?

01

‘Sentence Trouble’ has been written for everyone that works or volunteers in Youth Offending Teams (YOT), Secure Children’s Homes, Secure Training Centres and Young Offenders Institutions (YOI). It is intended to help improve understanding and communication with children and young people, particularly those with communication needs.

Introduction

Communication, with spoken words, written words and without words, is central to almost all human activity. Some people have disabilities or difficulties, which makes communication a special challenge for them. In order to communicate effectively, and participate fully, these people may need some additional support and are therefore said to have communication needs. Meeting these needs is not necessarily difficult or costly; often it is just about awareness and understanding and small adjustments to procedures and routines.

At least 60% of young people in the youth justice system have communication needs[1]. That could mean that over half of the young people you work with do not understand what people say to them or find it difficult to get their message across. Sometimes these difficulties are very clear, however more often they are less obvious and the young person may have developed ways to keep them hidden.
Communication needs can cause problems for a young person's behaviour, their confidence and their relationships with other people.

1. Bryan, K and Mackenzie, J (2008) *Meeting the Speech Language and Communication Needs of Vulnerable Young People*

What are communication needs?

02

The term communication needs describes a range of difficulties and disabilities that the young people you work with may have.

In this document we are mainly referring to young people who have speech, language and communication needs, Dyslexia and/or Autism Spectrum Disorders.

What we mean by speech, language and communication

Speech refers to

- Saying sounds accurately and in the right places in words
- Speaking fluently, without hesitating, or prolonging or repeating words or sounds
- Speaking with expression with a clear voice, using pitch, volume and intonation to support meaning

Language refers to speaking and understanding

- Using words to build up sentences, sentences to build up conversations and longer stretches of spoken language
- Putting information in the right order to make sense
- Understanding and making sense of what people say

Communication refers to how we interact with others

- Language used to represent concepts and thoughts
- Using language in different ways; to question, clarify, describe etc
- Non-verbal rules of communication; being able to listen to others, to take turns and to stick to the topic
- Being able to talk to people and take turns
- Being able to change language to suit the situation and person being spoken to
- Being able to consider other people's perspectives, intentions and the wider context
- Many children and young people communicate successfully using non-verbal means such as signing, gestures, communication books or electronic equipment

Speech, language and communication needs

People with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) have difficulties in communicating with others. This may be because they cannot say what they want to, they have difficulty understanding what is being said to them or they do not understand social rules. For some this may be minor and temporary whilst for others their needs will be complex and long-term.

SLCN can occur due to a number of different factors. There may be a specific difficulty with language only, without any general learning difficulties or physical or sensory impairments. This is often referred to as 'specific language impairment'.

Alternatively a person's SLCN may be part of another condition like general learning difficulties, learning disabilities, hearing impairments, Autism Spectrum Disorders or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) / Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD).

For some young people, their needs are linked to factors such as how and how much adults talk and interact with them.

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling[2]. It also affects language skills and it may be found alongside other kinds of learning difficulty. It is in no way related to general intelligence; many people with dyslexia are very bright and have certain other talents, but dyslexia also occurs amongst those with below average intellectual abilities.

Dyslexia is something that people are born with, or at least they are born with the risk factors for dyslexia. It tends to affect the person for the rest of their life, although ways of getting round most of the problems of dyslexia can be found. People with dyslexia usually have trouble with the sounds of language, particularly during childhood.

2. Rose, J (2009) *Identifying and Teaching Children and Young People with Dyslexia and Literacy Difficulties*

Other ways that dyslexia can affect someone include being unable to find words quickly to express what they want to say and problems with short term working memory such as remembering names and dates accurately and remembering events in the right order. As a result of these difficulties, dyslexic people tend to learn better in practically and visually based ways, which can put them at a disadvantage at school as this is heavily based on communication with words.

Because the skills of reading and writing also make use of areas of the brain to do with organisation, accessing language and holding immediate information, young people with dyslexia can appear to be very disorganised and may have trouble expressing themselves clearly, when speaking and when writing. 10% of the population have some degree of dyslexia and 4% have severe difficulties.

Autism Spectrum Disorders

Autism, including Asperger's Syndrome, is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with and relates to other people. It also affects how they make sense of the world. It is a spectrum disorder, which means that while all people with autism share certain difficulties their condition affects them in different ways.

Asperger's Syndrome is a form of autism. People with Asperger's Syndrome may be of average or above average intelligence, and have fewer problems with speech, but still have difficulties understanding and processing language, and communicating with other people[3].

3.National Autistic Society

How big is the problem?

03

We know from research that at least 60% of the young people involved in the youth justice system are likely to have communication needs. It is therefore safe to assume that any young person you are working with has communication needs until it is proven otherwise.

Over the following pages you will find some examples of typical situations to show just how much of your work relies on communication and language skills.

The police interview

During the interview, young people are usually accompanied by an appropriate adult and a solicitor and will be questioned by two officers.

The young person must:

- Answer questions, remembering to take into account legal advice
- Re-tell what happened in the right order with as much information as possible
- Manage to communicate clearly whilst under stress
- Read and sign their statement

A court appearance

During a court appearance, a young person must be able to:

- Talk to court staff in an appropriate way
- Discuss the offence with a solicitor, re-telling what happened and why, and how they feel about it
- Read out the oath in court
- Understand what is happening and the language being used
- Understand and remember what to do next (e.g. released on bail with conditions; attend appointment with YOT etc)
- Understand the consequences if they do not follow the court's instructions

Referred to a Youth Offending Team

During an ASSET assessment interview the young person needs to be able to:

- Arrive at the appointment on time
- Introduce themselves
- Remember who they are meeting and why
- Discuss the offence, re-telling what happened and why with as much information as possible and in the right order
- Recall information accurately about themselves and key life experiences (e.g. education and schooling)
- Read and understand their order

A custodial sentence

During a health assessment in a YOI, the young person has to recall past information and answer questions about their health and give consent for treatment. The young person needs to be able to:

- Listen and understand
- Answer questions
- Ask questions relevant to the assessment
- Read forms and other information
- Be able to formulate relevant information from the past into sentences that make sense

How do communication needs affect young people?

04

If a young person you work with has one or more communication needs, they are likely to be affected in a number of ways. The following stories are real examples of how communication needs have impacted some young people.

It will be difficult for a young person with communication needs to follow routines and the conditions of their orders.

Kevin's story

Kevin was told to attend his local YOT office at a particular date and time, but due to his dyslexia he confused the date and time so turned up at the wrong time on the wrong date, effectively breaching his order.

Young people with communication needs are likely to misunderstand information given to them verbally.

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".

Someone with communication needs may not understand the consequences of not following instructions.

Mark's story

Mark had the terms of his order explained to him by a YOT 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.

Not understanding something may cause a young person to feel anxious and frustrated, which can lead to an angry outburst or to them disengaging.

David's story

David's ability to understand spoken language and express himself is severely impaired for his age. He has difficulty listening, remembering spoken information and using formal language. David breached his ASBO, which stated that he could not travel on a 'motorised vehicle'. He had ridden an electric scooter and when asked about it he explained that it was not motorised as it was electric.

David appears more able than he is as he can hold a conversation and will attempt to respond even when he hasn't understood, making it seem as if he is able to join in. He can become quite aggressive and difficult to engage with and it is likely that his communication difficulties are underpinning these behaviours. He finds formal situations such as police interviews and court hearings extremely difficult to understand.

If a young person with communication needs feels stressed, this can bring out their difficulties even more.

Daniel's story

Daniel was 15 when he was remanded to custody. Whilst in custody he struggled to follow the routines and regime of the prison. He would press his cell bell when it wasn't an emergency and would be verbally aggressive to staff. After one incident, Daniel was returned to the wing in a highly distressed state. Four officers were demanding that he return to his room, giving him the same command in several different ways. It was suggested that three of the officers stand back, leaving the remaining officer to say "Daniel. Room, now". At this simple request he stood up and walked to his room.

Daniel has a language age equivalent of 9 ½ years old. By reducing the language load and the number of people speaking, he was able to understand simple commands. Daniel had good language skills and this masked most of his understanding difficulties.

How can I tell if someone has communication needs?

05

Typically the young people we are describing may show some of the signs shown on this chart. If you see some of these things, it might be because the young person has communication needs, in which case there are things that you can do to help them. For many of the young people you work with, no one has noticed their difficulties before.

Poor social and conversation skills

- They appear to overreact to jokes and sarcasm or become very angry at something that isn't identifiable to anyone else
- They are very quiet and hold back and then just follow along with everyone else
- They will watch to see if other people laugh and then will laugh too but would not be able to explain what was funny
- They avoid conversations and communication by avoiding appointments and group situations. They may spend more time on their own and may prefer to eat alone and appear to like Loss of Association time
- They avoid conversations and communication by 'hiding' in groups – in a group of their own peers they can laugh along and feel normal. They may be extremely difficult to see on a one to one basis

Poor organisational skills

- They are disorganised and chaotic. They will regularly forget what they are supposed to be doing. They may ask for the time constantly or ask what's happening for the rest of the day
- They forget to bring things for their appointments or forget appointments altogether
- They have trouble putting things in the right order and will forget what's happening next. They may have trouble telling you what happened in the correct sequence of events

Unclear speech

- Their speech may be difficult to understand – they may mumble, have a lisp or a stammer

Poor understanding

- They do not follow your instructions or do not follow them properly - they may only do the last thing you asked them to do or just look blank
- They may break rules again and again despite constant reminders from staff. They may not learn from past experiences or understand the consequences of their actions

Poor language skills

- They may repeat themselves when recounting events or stories and may get lost while trying to tell you something
- They may not be able to say things in the right order or sequence – this will get worse if they are stressed or under pressure
- You may become confused about what it is they are trying to tell you
- They may appear to be 'making stuff up' or lying because of the pauses, repetitions and confusion

Poor reading and writing skills

- They pretend to be able to read and/or avoid reading and writing
- They may have slow reading and/or writing speed and poor spelling and will therefore have problems filling out forms
- Their handwriting is not clear and they may use capital letters to disguise difficulties with reversible letters (e.g. d/b)
- They misread similar words (e.g. was / saw, county / country)

Poor number skills

- They have difficulty remembering a string of numbers such as telephone numbers
- They may get dates and times wrong when recalling events and appointments

What are the benefits of better communication?

06

As successful communicators, it is the role of the staff member to support young people's communication needs. Getting this right will benefit your working life.

If a young person you work with has a communication need, how you talk and interact with them can make a big difference:

- They will engage and want to participate
- They will understand more and are less likely to kick off and disengage
- You will spend less time having to manage their behaviour
- Education, skills training, offending behaviour or any other direct work will be more successful
- There will be better outcomes from court reports and Youth Rehabilitation Orders

How can I support children and young people with communication needs? 07

In this section you will find a range of tips and suggestions that are proven to support young people with communication needs.

Whenever you are speaking to a young person, always start by using their name so that they understand you are talking to them.

Use simple language

"You have been remanded in custody" could be changed to "you're going to stay here in prison until the next time you are in X court on X day, which is X weeks away"

Use short chunks of language

Only include the important points:

"you're staying here for now" pause

"the court will decide if you are guilty or not guilty" pause *"we will find out about that in four weeks time"*

Speak a little slower than you would normally do

This will help them to listen to what you are saying

Ask the young person to repeat back in their own words what you have said

This will check that they have understood what they have to do or have to remember

Give pointers for what they should listen to

"It's important you remember X from what I am going to tell you"

Give an overview first

Summarise where necessary before you go into detail

Give extra time for the young person to listen and process

This will help them to understand what you have said

Use visual aids to support understanding

You could draw or number things as you explain something or ask them to picture it in their head

Give reminders of appointments

Contact them 24 hours before to remind them

Give a variety of tasks

This will help to maintain interest

Give positive messages

"It's OK to say if you don't understand" or "it's important you tell me if you don't understand"

Give positive feedback

But be sensitive as some people find praise difficult to accept

Ask them what would help them

Asking them and/or their parents what would help them understand or be better supported will help find the best approach

Say when you have not understood what has been said

"I'm not sure I've got that right… did X happen first? Then what?"

Make written materials simple and clear

Avoid using complicated terminology and use a clear font such as Arial

Think about the language you are using

Speech and Language Therapists working with Bradford YOT and Milton Keynes YOT have identified that significant numbers of young people do not understand some of the language used in court. Using alternatives to the following words and phrases, or explaining what they mean, will help all young people to understand what is happening to them. For example: instead of using the word "custody" use "prison" and rather than say "adjourn" say "the court hearing has been stopped for now and will begin again on X day".

Actions
Adjourn
Alleged
Attack
Attend
Bail
Breach
Circumstances
Compensation
Comply
Concurrent
Conditional / unconditional
Contract
Conviction
Convince
Custody
Defence
Failing to attend
Guilty / Not Guilty
Impose
"In your defence"
Legal advisor
Liable
Magistrate
Offence
Punish
Punishment
Relevant
Remorse
Reparation
Report
Responsible
Revocation
Solicitor
Statement
Supervision
Threatening
Usher
Victim

What can make the situation worse?

08

On the next two pages there is a list of some of the things that you should avoid doing as they do not support young people with communication needs.

- Do not interrupt or finish a young person's sentences for them
- Do not use complicated or complex words - if this is unavoidable then make sure you explain what it means in words they can understand
- Do not talk about events in an order out of sequence from how they actually happened
- Do not expect young people to sit at tables to work for a long time
- Do not assume someone understands what you are talking about, even if they say that they do
- Do not assume young people can read and write
- Do not correct a young person's language for them
- Do not forget that they may experience mental overload and 'shut down'
- Do not go on too long - allow breaks of at least 10 minutes for 50 minutes of proceedings
- Do not rush a young person - allow time for speaking and reading responses

Where can I find further information?

09

The website www.sentencetrouble.info has been developed to work alongside this book and will be regularly updated with information and resources to help you support young people with communication difficulties.

Ask your manager what local provision is available for young people who need support with their communication skills. Alternatively contact your local primary care trust (PCT) to find Speech and Language Therapy Services near to you that can provide further advice and support.

Sources of additional information

For further information on the work of The Communication Trust and contact details for consortium members visit the Trust's website www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk or telephone 020 7843 2550

For further information on Autism Spectrum Disorders, contact the National Autistic Society helpline on 0845 070 4004. Download Autism advice for people working in the criminal justice system via www.nas.org.uk (search for criminal justice) or visit www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk

For further information and advice with supporting young people with dyslexia, contact the British Dyslexia Association helpline on 0845 251 9002 or visit www.thedyslexia-spldtrust.org.uk

Visit www.rcslt.org or email postmaster@rcslt.org for information on the youth justice work of the Royal College of Speech & Language Therapists (RCSLT) and for speech, language and communication resources on developing services for young people with communication difficulties. The RCSLT can also put you in contact with criminal justice system managers who already use speech and language therapy services as well as expert therapists who can provide information on supporting young people's communication.

Credits

Sentence Trouble has been produced in partnership by The Communication Trust, The Dyslexia SpLD Trust and the Autism Education Trust.

Produced with the support of the Royal College of Speech & Language Therapists, the Association of Youth Offending Team Managers and the Youth Justice Board.

The Communication Trust

The Communication Trust consists of over 35 voluntary sector organisations that bring together their expertise to ensure that the speech, language and communication needs of all children and young people are met through signposting specialist training support and guidance to people working with children.

Members of The Communication Trust consortium:

1 Voice, Ace Centre North, Ace Centre, Action for Children, Afasic, Association for the Rehabilitation of Communication and Oral Skills (ARCOS), Auditory Verbal UK, Barnardo's, British Stammering Association, Candle, CENMAC, Chailey Heritage Clinical Services, Communication Matters, Communications Forum, Contact a Family, Council for Disabled Children, DialogueLab, I CAN, Language for Learning, Makesense, Mencap, National Association of Professionals concerned with Language Impairment in Children (NAPLIC), National Autistic Society (NAS), National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS), National Literacy Trust, St Catherine's, Scope, Selective Mutism Information and Research Association (SMIRA), Social Emotional Behavioural Difficulties Association (SEBDA), Symbol UK, The Children's Society, The Children's Trust Tadworth, The Learning Partnership.com, The Makaton Charity, The Michael Palin Centre for Stammering Children, The Signalong Group, TreeHouse

The Dyslexia-SpLD

The Dyslexia-SpLD Trust is a consortium of organisations involved in promoting improved practice and outcomes for individuals with dyslexia and specific learning difficulties. The Dyslexia-SpLD Trust was established to provide information on effective provision for educating and supporting individuals with dyslexia and specific learning difficulties.

Members of The Dyslexia SpLD Trust consortium:

British Dyslexia Association, Dyslexia Action, Helen Arkell Centre, The Professional Association of Teachers of Students with Specific Learning Difficulties (PATOSS), Springboard for Children, Xtraordinary People.

The Autism Education Trust

The Autism Education Trust works to raise awareness of autism education across the children's workforce. We bring together organisations involved in delivering autism education services, to share good practice and information and to involve children and young people with autism and their carers to enhance and improve autism education in England.

Members of the Autism Education Trust steering group include:
Autism Alliance, Wessex Autistic Society, National Autistic Society, TreeHouse, Council for Disabled Children, Blackpool Local Authority, West Midlands Regional Hub, South Gloucestershire Local Authority, Autism Centre for Education and Research at University of Birmingham.

The Communication Trust youth justice programme steering group
The Communication Trust is advised by a steering group on the strategic development and delivery of the Trust's youth justice programme of work. Steering group members: Andrew Ball, The Communication Trust; Steven Boyd, HMYOI Hindley; Karen Bryan, University of Surrey; Mary Hartshorne, I CAN; Caroline Hattersley, Autism Education Trust; Glenys Heap, Dyslexia Action; Anita Kerwin-Nye, The Communication Trust; Anne Mackintosh, Skills for Justice; Jane Mackenzie, Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists; Diz Minnitt, Association of Youth Offending Team Managers; John Rack, Dyslexia SpLD Trust; and the Youth Justice Board

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