

Children and young people in care

F's story

F 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, a speech and language therapist (SLT) undertook a full assessment of F. This revealed that she had a range of unidentified speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). The SLT advised both F 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, F's communication, social skills and behaviour improved and the charges against her were dropped. Staffing levels were reduced to 2:1 and 1:1 support was trialled at school. Her social worker commented, 'What I have experienced is F'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.'

Prevalence of speech, language and communication needs

Many children and young people in care have unidentified and/or unmet communication and interaction needs. These are often previously unidentified.

- A high proportion of children and young people in the care system have SLCN – **63% in one study**.¹
- An Office of National Statistics review of the health needs of looked after children found that despite evidence of serious underreporting SLCN were **the second most frequently reported difficulty for looked after children**.²
- **58% of those seen by 'No Wrong Door'**, North Yorkshire County Council's model around 'rethinking care for adolescents', were identified as having SLCN.³
- **Looked after children** with a range of needs, including SLCN, are **overrepresented in the criminal justice system**.⁴
- Looked after children have **poorer language skills on entry to school** than those not looked after.⁵

Impact of speech, language and communication needs

Looked after children with SLCN can have difficulty understanding what is being said to and asked of them, difficulty making themselves understood, and difficulties with social communication. SLCN 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 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.

Recommendation in Bercow: Ten Years On

***Bercow: Ten Years On* recommends that the Department for Education's pilots of mental health assessments for looked after children reflect the prevalence of SLCN in looked after children.**

5.10 Government departments should ensure that practitioners who work with children and young people in settings with a known high prevalence of SLCN must be trained in recognising and responding appropriately to communication needs.

When a speech and language therapy assessment or specialist advice and support is required, they should have access to specially commissioned speech and language therapy services.

The Department for Education should implement this recommendation within their:

- *plans to transform alternative provision; and*
- *pilots of mental health assessments for looked after children.*

Good practice highlighted in Bercow: Ten Years On

***Bercow: Ten Years On* highlights No Wrong Door as an example of good practice in identifying and supporting looked after children's communication needs.**

No Wrong Door, North Yorkshire County Council's model around 'Rethinking care for adolescents', offers an innovative and highly effective service to looked after children and those on the edge of care. Employment of speech and language therapists identified a huge unidentified need, with over 50% of young people having SLCN in the looked after children service. A joined up approach with professionals and co-production with young people has enabled some truly life changing outcomes.

The estimated cost savings associated with the work of the speech and language therapists to carry out speech and language assessments and provide support to meet speech, language and communication needs is just over £300,000 per annum.⁶

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References

- 1 McCool S and Stevens IC (2011). Identifying speech, language and communication needs among children and young people in residential care. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*; 46(6): 665-74.
- 2 Meltzer H. (2002) The mental health of young people looked after by local authorities in England. Office of National Statistics. <http://bit.ly/2lpmt51>
- 3 Evaluation of the No Wrong Door Innovation Programme Research Report, Department for Education, (2017). <http://bit.ly/2u527qM>
- 4 The Prison Reform Trust (2016). In Care Out of Trouble. <http://bit.ly/2aM6JqO>
- 5 Pears, K.C., Heywood, C.V., Kim, H.K., and Fisher, P.A. (2011). Pre-reading Deficits in Children in Foster Care. *School Psychology Review*, Volume 40 (1), pp.140-148.
- 6 Evaluation of the No Wrong Door Innovation Programme Research Report, Department for Education, (2017). <http://bit.ly/2u527qM>