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Language Skills in Incarcerated Young Offenders: Links with Offending Severity

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Language skills in incarcerated young offenders: Links with offending severity

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- Department of the Attorney General (New South Wales)
- The young people themselves

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In this presentation

- A quick re-cap on oral language / oral language competence
- Why study the language skills of young people in the YJ system?
- Research on the language skills of young offenders
- Implications
 - ✓ Early intervention / schools
 - ✓ Forensic interviewing
 - ✓ Counselling
 - ✓ Restorative Justice Conferencing
 - ✓ Literacy interventions

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ORAL LANGUAGE ?

Everyday talking
(expressive) and
listening (receptive /
comprehension) skills


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Oral language competence

- The means by which we negotiate the business of everyday life
- Socially determined *and* deterministic: a social gradient exists
- Reflects a wide range of biopsychosocial factors; e.g., genetic / neurodevelopmental factors, early secure attachment and degree of language enrichment in the early years
- Closely tied to social cognition
- With development, becomes increasingly sophisticated and subtle with respect to social, cultural, and contextual aspects of communication
- Requires comprehension and use of non-literal linguistic devices such as metaphor, sarcasm, analogy, figures of speech – in which literal meaning says little about intended meaning
- Closely tied to and underpins the transition to literacy in the early school years

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Adolescence: A risk & protective factor framework

Risk Factors

- **Poor academic Achievement**
- Coercive parenting
- Sensation-seeking personality
- History of conduct disturbance
- Lack of connectedness
- Substance-abusing peers

Protective Factors

- **Academic success**
- Positive parental support
- Strong self-esteem
- Resilience
- Strong sense of connectedness
- Non substance-abusing peers

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Child and adolescent mental health and language competence

- Persistence of MH problems in LI samples from childhood to adulthood (Beitchman et al., Canada)
- Over-representation of social anxiety disorder in LI children (Brinton & Fujiki, USA)
- Social / emotional distress in young people with SLI (Durkin & Conti-Ramsden, UK; Snowling, Bishop et al., UK)
- Language and social disadvantage (Hart & Risley, USA; Spencer, Clegg, Stackhouse, UK; Roy & Chiat, UK)
- Over-representation of unrecognised LI in behaviourally disturbed boys (Cohen et al., Canada)
- Narrative impairments in children referred for Ψ problems - Internalising / Externalising (Cohen et al., Canada)
- Language problems in children excluded from school (Ripley & Yuill, UK)

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WHAT DO THESE PARADIGM GAPS HAVE TO DO WITH LANGUAGE FUNCTIONING IN HIGH-RISK YOUNG PEOPLE?

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The pathway to offending

- Male:Female ratio of 5:1 (Higher in custodial settings)
- Over-representation of
 - Single-parent households – absent fathers
 - Dysfunctional communication / parenting
 - Parental mental health problems
 - Involvement with child protection services
 - **History of behaviour / conduct disturbance**
 - Low educational attainment / attainment
 - School exclusion
 - Developmental disability (diagnosed or not)
 - Low SES; low human and social capital
 - Intergenerational un/under-employment in parents
 - Early initiation into substance use / abuse



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Implications for language development?

- Male:Female ratio of 5:1 (Higher in custodial settings)
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The Victorian Youth Justice context



- Active diversion of youth offenders from custodial sentences
- Unique “Dual Track” system for 17-20 year-olds
- Lowest rate of youth supervision or detention nationally (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2006)
- Fewer Aboriginal offenders than other States

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LI in a custodial YJ sample in Victoria (Snow & Powell, 2011)

- Built on three earlier studies of community-based samples showing ~50% LI
- n=100 young males completing custodial sentences
- All relevant ethics approvals
- Mean age = 19.03 (SD=.85)
- K-BIT2 NV IQ Mean = 86.0 (16.4)
- Mean Yrs education = 9.8 (SD=1.7)



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Measures

- ▶ CELF-4 (Core Language Score)
- ▶ Test of Language Competence – Expanded edition (3 subtests)
- ▶ Narrative discourse (story telling) production
- ▶ Nonverbal IQ – K-BIT2
- ▶ Mental Health - DASS
- ▶ Offending type and severity – Cormier-Lang Crime Index (CLCI)
- ▶ History of Out-of-Home Care Placement – self-report
- ▶ Developmental History (self-report via structured interview)

What we found

- 46% of young offenders were classified as “language impaired” on formal testing – using a (too?) conservative cut-off
 - ❖ (Vs approx 7-10% of general population with some degree of LI).
- Deficits existed across the spectrum of language skills – expressive and receptive, narrative language, using and understanding figurative language etc
- LI subgroup did not differ from non-LI subgroup with respect to nonverbal IQ or mental health problems
- The majority of those with a LI had been identified as needing special services in the early school years; many reported receiving some form of early intervention, but early school departure was the norm

What we found....cont

- Rates of LI were even higher (62%) in those (n=29) who had been in Out of Home Care placement
- Overwhelming majority left school around Yrs 8-10
- Marketable employment skills were virtually absent
- While in an earlier Community sample, the relationship between LI and offending pattern was unclear, in the Custodial sample, language differences were identified b/w two offending subgroups

Violent Offending and LI



- History of violence present in 87% of cases
- Quantified using CLCI
- Two subgroups* created based on severity median split on CLCI Scales 1 & 2
 - ‘High’ Offending scores on both: n = 26
 - ‘Not-High’ Offending scores on both: n = 74

**Differed on years of education but not on nonverbal IQ*

Measure	High Offending Scores on CLCI Scales 1&2 (n=26)		No L-High offending Scores on CLCI Scales 1&2 (n=74)		t	p*	d
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
TLC-E Subtest 1 Ambiguous Sentences Standardised Score	4.2	1.9	4.8	2.5	1.1	.14	.27
TLC-E Subtest 2 Listening Comprehension Standardised Score	4.9	2.6	5.2	2.5	.48	.31	.12
TLC-E Subtest 4 Figurative Language Standardised Score	4.2	2.1	5.6	2.8	2.3	.01	.56
CELF4 Recalling Sentences	4.7	2.9	5.4	3.2	.97	.16	.23
CELF4 Formulating Sentences	3.8	3.3	5.6	3.4	2.3	.012	.53
CELF4 Word Classes (1 & 2)	4.0	2.6	6.3	3.1	3.3	.00	.80
CELF4 Word Definitions	5.0	3.8	6.5	4.0	1.5	.055	.38
CELF4 Core Language Score	63.7	19.9	74.1	19.1	2.4	.01	.53

CELF4 Core Language range X Cormier Lang Subgroup				
>75 th percentile on <u>both</u> violent and non-violent offending				
Median Split Cross-tabulation				
		Cormier Lang CI Subgroup		
		CL scores on both scales >75 th percentile	CL scores "not high" on both scales	
		"High"	"Not high"	Total
CELF4 Core Language Score: range	Average (86-114)	1	21	22
	Marginal/Borderline/Mild (78-85)	1	19	20
	Low range/Moderate (71-77)	0	8	8
	Very low range/Severe (70 and below)	5	45	50
		7	93	100

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Implications / questions re LI and interpersonal violence in young offenders

- Aggregation of risk-factors in more complex young offenders?
- Difficulty resolving ambiguous social cues?
- Lack of verbal skills in defusing / de-escalating potentially volatile interpersonal exchanges?

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Limitations

- Non-random sample
- Cross-sectional
- No participants from ATSI* backgrounds
- Males* only
- Scale and scope of language testing*
- Limited data on Child Protection involvement
- Reliance on self-report for biographical / developmental data

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Implications?

- **Early years educational practice / intervention** for "high-risk boys", esp where behaviour disturbance + learning difficulties are present
- **Forensic Interviewing** / Coping with a police interview; understanding the court process, bail conditions, formal caution etc
- **Interventions for young people once they are in the system**
 - Restorative Justice Conferencing
 - Counselling ("talk therapies")
 - Specific programs – anger management, sex offender treatment
 - Literacy programmes

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Early years educational practice / intervention for "high-risk boys", esp where behaviour disturbance + learning difficulties are present

The transition to literacy....

- Is not biologically 'natural' – children require specific and prolonged instruction (though to varying degrees);
- Builds directly on psycholinguistic competencies acquired (to varying degrees) before school entry;
- Snowling & Hulme (2011) *Literacy is parasitic on language*
- Promotes
 - ✓ academic achievement,
 - ✓ school attachment and retention,
 - ✓ positive self esteem
- An important Protective Factor
- Learning to Read Vs Reading to Learn
- The Matthew Effect
- The Peter Effect



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Boys with
behaviour problems + learning difficulties =



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Behaviour and communication

- Behaviour is communication
- Behaviour may communicate a skill deficit
- Need for SLPs, teachers, parents, and psychologists/other welfare personnel to collaborate closely and consistently
- Need to re-think use of suspension & expulsion
- School-to-prison pipeline
- ❖ Behaviour problems are serious MH issues

Comorbidity is the norm



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Forensic Interviewing / Coping with a police / lawyer interview; understanding the court process, bail conditions, formal cautions: narrative demands



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Forensic Interviewing - cont.

NB schools need to conduct “forensic” interviews too – narrative skills are critical



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Interventions for young people once they are in the youth justice system

- Restorative Justice Conferencing
- Counselling (AKA “talk therapies”)
- Literacy programmes



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Talking about feelings

- A “higher-order” communicative skill
- Draws on a range of cognitive, psychological and social factors
- **Alexithymia = Lack of words for emotions**
- Typically associated with autism spectrum disorders
- May also occur in children who have been victims/witnesses to trauma
- Easily missed / misinterpreted by clinicians, teachers etc
- **Rates in young offenders?**

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Language problems are invisible



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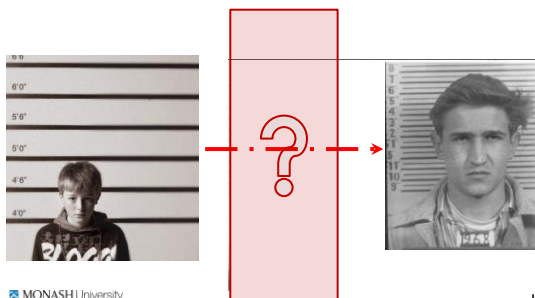
Language Impairment may masquerade as

- Rudeness
- Indifference / lack of concern
- Poor motivation to cooperate
- “Yep, nup, dunno, maybe”...and other minimalist responses
- Suggestibility / acquiescence in forensic interviews, whether as suspects, witnesses or victims
- Behaviour disturbance
- Low IQ
- **No language problem at all**



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Disrupting this trajectory



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Former Chair of the UK Youth Justice Board, Rod Morgan (2007):



“It may be too much to say that if we reformed our schools, we would have no need of prisons. But if we better engaged our children and young people in education we would almost certainly have less need of prisons. Effective crime prevention has arguably more to do with education than sentencing policy.”

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Some recent publications

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