



The Leverhulme Trust

‘YOT Talk’ Toolkit

Strategies for effective communication in Youth Justice Assessment Interviews

The **YOT Talk** research project (2017-2019) examined communication in assessment interviews in the Youth Justice System.

Working with Youth Offending Teams (“YOTs”) across the UK, we observed assessment interviews and analysed how the participants spoke to each other. We also talked to practitioners and young people about the things that can make communicating difficult, and the strategies they use to overcome these challenges.

The advice contained in this toolkit is based on both our analysis and the views of young people and practitioners. It addresses six key areas highlighted by the research.

Challenges

1. Building rapport

- There is an inherent power imbalance between young people and practitioners in the assessment interview context.
- Young people may have had bad previous experiences talking to professionals (e.g. social workers, teachers...) or even adults in general, and may bring negative preconceptions into the interview.
- The amount of information that needs to be collected can limit opportunities for rapport building.

2. Focusing on resilience

- There is limited time to conduct an assessment interview and produce a completed assessment form.
- Although there is scope to discuss the young person's strengths and interests, the assessment framework is largely offence and risk-factor focused. The late placement of resilience, goals and desistance within the framework can mean that they get dealt with later in the interview and receive less attention and engagement.

3. Prompting discussion

- Closed questions (yes/no questions) are an efficient way of getting information, but they also limit the young person's answer options. As a result they are more likely to get minimal responses.
- Open questions encourage more extended engaged responses, but they can be more difficult for young people to understand and/or answer.

4. Addressing difficult topics

- Assessment interviews address a range of topics that can be difficult for young people to talk about.
- These topics may have to be addressed before there has been a chance to build trust with the young person.
- The topics that young people find difficult, and the amount of background information available to practitioners, varies from assessment to assessment.

5. Identifying positives

- The assessment framework is geared more towards identifying risk factors than it is to identifying positives.
- Some young people find it hard to identify or hear positive things about themselves, particularly if they have received years of negative feedback from parents, teachers, peers...etc.

6. Ensuring understanding

- Some of the words and phrases that occur frequently in interviews (e.g. "restorative justice", "reparation", "impulsivity") are complex for any young person to understand.
- Our study suggested that young people are more likely to check that a practitioner has understood them, than they are to check that they have understood the practitioner.

Solutions

- ◆ Start the session with an informal discussion (e.g. ask about the young person's day, interests, pets...).
- ◆ Stress that your job, first and foremost, is to offer support.
- ◆ Ask the young person about their previous experiences of talking with professionals. Whatever the answer it will help explain their reaction to you and will be helpful in informing your approach.
- ◆ There is no "one size fits all" solution to rapport building, but some approaches include: accommodating the young person's choice of words; telling the young person a bit about yourself; commenting on the question; giving the young person a chance to show what they know; using inclusive language; using humour...(see 'YOT Talk Toolkit Supporting Document' for examples)

- ◆ The assessment framework is flexible. You can start (and end) interviews with discussions of interests and goals. This frames the intervention in terms of things that help avoid offending from the start.
- ◆ Young people are happiest to talk about interests and goals, so leading with these topics may also help with initial engagement and rapport building.

- ◆ As far as possible, use open questioning when trying to encourage more extended responses.
- ◆ When using closed questions keep in mind that too many of them can lead to a 'tick-box' style interview.
- ◆ Closed questions can be a good way of targeting information or identifying the areas that require more discussion. These areas can then be explored using open questions.

- ◆ Acknowledge that some of the topics may be difficult to talk about . Give the young person plenty of warning before addressing a difficult topic.
- ◆ Give the young person some control of how difficult topics are addressed by, for instance, giving them the option of discussing a topic in private, and letting them guide how much detail they are willing to give.
- ◆ Consider delaying particularly difficult topics until later in the interview so that you start to get to know the young person and build trust first. This initial relationship building could also have a positive impact on quality of information the young person is willing to provide.

- ◆ Consistently identify and highlight strengths and positive elements of the young person's behaviour, even when the overall picture is more complicated.
- ◆ Encourage the young person to recognise their own strengths.

- ◆ Explain difficult words in simple, relatable terms, particularly those referring to the assessment/intervention.
- ◆ Ask questions about complex words and phrases in the intervention. This is a good way to check not only that a young person has understood these ideas, but *how* they have understood them.
- ◆ Our study suggested that young people tend to struggle with the same interview questions. If you notice that a particular question or topic is always challenging, make a note of it and take extra care to explain it.

YOT Talk Toolkit Supporting Document

For more information on any of the issues addressed in this toolkit along with examples from the assessment interviews we observed, see the 'YOT Talk' Toolkit: **Extended Version**, available at:
www.yottalk.wordpress.com

Other communication resources for working with young people

ClearCut Communications, County Durham

Get Hackney Talking (<https://gethackneytalking.co.uk/>)

The Communication Trust: Resources for practitioners (<https://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/resources/resources/resources-for-practitioners/>)

Communications Passports (<https://www.communicationmatters.org.uk/page/communication-passports>)

Talking Mats (<https://www.talkingmats.com/>)

Journey Through Justice (<https://www.cycj.org.uk/resource/journey-through-justice/>)

Mind of My Own App (<https://mindofmyown.org.uk/>)

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