



The Leverhulme Trust

‘YOT Talk’ Toolkit: Extended Version (with supporting information)



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Transcription Key for the Examples

In this toolkit we make use of transcripts of speech from assessment interviews. As well as recording the words that were said, these transcripts contain some information about the context and *how* words were said. The symbols and formats that we used to record this information are explained in the 'Transcription Key' below...

Transcription Key

(0.2) numbers in brackets indicate that there is a pause and give the length of that pause in seconds.

= equals signs show that a speaker has kept speaking as soon as the other speaker stopped with no pause between.

[] single square brackets indicate speakers talking over one another. The overlapping words are shown in the brackets.

(()) double brackets are used to describe things in the transcription that aren't words e.g. *((laughs))*. Double brackets are also used to describe in general terms details that have been anonymised in the transcription, e.g. *((first name))* *((relative))*.

Underlined words indicate that the speaker puts stress/emphasis on a word.

Bold text is used to highlight the words and phrases that illustrate the communicative strategy being discussed.

Introduction: YOT Talk: Promoting Engagement in Youth Justice Assessment Interviews

The 'YOT Talk' project

The 'YOT Talk' research project* looked at communication in assessment interviews in the Youth Justice System from a multi-disciplinary and practice-oriented perspective. Specifically we considered features other than specific learning difficulties that might affect how young people and practitioners communicate in this context.

To investigate this we observed, recorded, and analysed 19 assessment interviews (c. 16.5 hours) across three Youth Offending Teams and talked to 80 practitioners and young people across four sites about their experiences of interacting with each other, and the factors that may help or hinder communication.

The information contained in this document is thus centrally informed by the views of young people and practitioners in the Youth Justice System.



* A Leverhulme-funded research project which ran for two years from 2017-2019, and was based at Loughborough University and Swansea University.

The 'YOT Talk' materials

Based on the results of our project, we have developed:

- A **toolkit** outlining the key communication features that affect engagement in assessment interviews, the challenges that practitioners and young people face, and the ways that these challenges can be addressed;
- This **Extended Version** of the toolkit elaborating on the key communication features along with illustrative examples, from the project findings, of strategies for achieving meaningful engagement in practice.

Each of the 6 sections of this document covers one communicative feature and is presented in the sub-sections:

- **Challenges**
- **Solutions**
- **Examples** of good practice, taken from assessment interview transcripts.

We hope that you find this and the *'YOT Talk' Toolkit* to be helpful reference materials when conducting assessment interviews and reflecting on assessment interview practice.

Section 1: Building Rapport

Challenges

- 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 within the assessment framework can limit opportunities for rapport building.

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 ('we'); using humour...(see **Examples on Page 2**)

Examples

Accommodating young person's choice of words

Young person: ...say if he didn't **bump into me yeah?**

Practitioner: (0.1) mhm

Young person: I wouldn't have done it

Practitioner: okay, perhaps (0.2) if you had (0.2) felt a different way when he **bumped into you** (0.1) you might not have done it

Young person: yeah

Practitioner: how did it make you feel when he did **bump into ya**

Self-disclosure (i.e. telling the young person a bit about yourself and your experiences)

Practitioner: bits of school enjoyed (0.1) y'know (0.1) bits (0.1) but there's other bits I wasn't too keen on (0.1) to be honest

Commenting on (where appropriate maybe even joking about) the question

Practitioner: ...it tells me here to ask you that but I dunno **it's a quite a** (0.4) **strange question** (0.2) do you know what I mean by that?

Giving the young people a chance to show off what they know

Practitioner: in terms of (0.2) geography in terms of things around here **you might have to help me out a little bit** (0.5) alright I'm not from this area (0.2) so you're gonna have to tell me about it...

Using Inclusive language (e.g. "we") to talk about the intervention as something you and the young person do together,

Practitioner: "what **we**'re gonna do..."

Practitioner: "so if **we** took out nicotine and **we** eventually stopped..."

Using Humour

Practitioner: what d'you think you've learnt then?

Young person: it's not worth it. costs money.

Practitioner: I know! it's a lot of money by the end isn't it?

Young person: yeah

Practitioner: **that was one expensive ((object)) ((laughs))**

Young person: **((laughs)) I know**

N.B. Using humour seems more suited to maintaining rather than building rapport as it is easier to formulate jokes built on shared experience, and it can take time to get a sense of what a young person will find funny.

Section 2: Focusing on Resilience

Challenges

- There is limited time to conduct an assessment interview and complete an assessment form.
- Although there is some scope in the current assessment framework to address positive factors in the young person's life, the framework is largely an offence and risk-factor focused.
- The late placement of resilience, goals, and other desistence factors in the framework can mean that they get dealt with later in the interview and receive less attention and engagement than the earlier-placed discussions of offending and risks.

Solutions

- The assessment framework is flexible. You can start (and end) interviews with discussions of interests and goals. This frames the intervention in terms of resilience from the start, and underlines the fact that you are primarily there to offer support (see suggested re-ordering in **Box 2** on page 6)
- Our results show that young people are happiest to talk about interests and goals; leading with these topics may also help with initial engagement and rapport building.

Section 2: Focusing on Resilience

Current assessment framework structure

Living Arrangements and Environmental Factors

Parenting, Family, and Relationships

Young Person Development

Learning, Education, Training, and Employment

Offending and Anti-Social Behaviour

Patterns and Attitudes

Other Behaviours of Particular Concern

Resilience and Goals

Opportunities

Engagement and Participation

Factors Affecting Desistance

Box 1

Positively-focused assessment structure

Resilience and Goals

Opportunities

Engagement and Participation

Factors Affecting Desistance

Living Arrangements and Environmental Factors

Parenting, Family, and Relationships

Young Person Development

Learning, Education, Training, and Employment

Offending and Anti-Social Behaviour

Patterns and Attitudes

Other Behaviours of Particular Concern

*Revisit Resilience and Goals to formulate the
Intervention Plan*

Box 2

Section 3: Prompting Discussion

Challenges

- Closed questions (questions it is possible to answer yes/no) are an efficient method of getting specific information quickly, which can reduce time pressure to complete the assessment form. However, they also limit the young person's answer options. As a result, as show in our research, they are more like to get minimal responses than open questions.
- Open questions (that is, questions like "how?", "why?" "what...?" which cannot be answered with a yes/no) encourage extended or engaged responses, but they can be more difficult for young people to understand and/or answer than closed questions.

Solutions

- As far as possible, use open questions when trying to encourage extended responses. (See **Example 1**)
- When using closed questions, keep in mind that too many of them can lead to a 'tick-box' style interview.
- While not so suited to meaningful engagement, 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. (See **Example 2**)

Section 3: Prompting Discussion

Example 1

Practitioner: okay (0.3) so (0.1) do you understand (1.3) how serious the offence is?

Closed question

Young person: (1.1) yeah

Minimal response

Practitioner: yeah (0.2) okay so tell me more about that why d'you think it's serious?

Open question(s)
follow up

Example 2

Practitioner: okay and there's some stuff here about mental health and stuff, "I feel good about myself"

Closed question

Young person: (0.1) yeah

Practitioner: (0.2) yeah? (0.7) got a positive outlook?

Closed question

Young person: yeah

Practitioner: 'kay. "I eat well".

Closed question

Young person: (0.1) yeah.

Practitioner: (0.2) "sleep well"?

Closed question

Young person: no (0.6) I sleep shit

Practitioner: (0.3) okay (0.2) m'kay (1.2) what is so bad about your sleep?

Open question
enabled by
preceding series
of closed
questions

Section 4: Addressing Difficult Topics

Challenges

- 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.

Solutions

- Acknowledge that it is an unusual discussion, and that some topics may be difficult to talk about (See **Example 3**). Give the young person plenty of warning before addressing difficult topics.
- Give the young person some control over 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. (See **Examples 4 and 5**).
- 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 may also have a positive impact on quality of information the young person is willing to provide.

Section 4: Addressing Difficult Topics

Example 3

*Practitioner: okay (2.0) well **I appreciate that this is y'know again like I said it's not (0.3) nice to talk about but (0.2) I (0.1) also appreciate your honesty (0.2) because (0.6) if it's something that you wanna change (0.9) then this is the first step***

Example 4

Practitioner: and then (0.1) w- it's asking you to (0.1) explain why did you do it

Young person: not sure (0.7) drunk

*Practitioner: okay (2.7) y'know **some people (0.5) go into great detail here other people like yourself (0.2) quite short (0.1) sweet (0.1) erm (0.4) yeah (0.1) anything else you wanna add?***

Young person: no

Practitioner: okay

Example 5

*Practitioner: **would it be too painful for me to (0.2) ask you***

Young person: = no go ahead

Practitioner: erm (0.2) about (0.1) ((traumatic family event))?

Section 5: Identifying Positives

Challenges

- The assessment framework is geared more towards identifying risk factors than it is to identifying positives about the young person.
- Even discussions of desistance can contribute to this risk and offence-focus, when they address how the young person might avoid negative actions rather than promoting positive action.
- 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.

Solutions

- Consistently identify and highlight strengths and elements of positive behaviour (see **Example 6**).
- Point to positive elements of the young person's behaviour, even when the overall picture is more complicated (as in **Examples 7 and 8**).
- Start the assessment with discussions of resilience and goals (see **Section 2**).

Section 5: Identifying Positives

Example 6

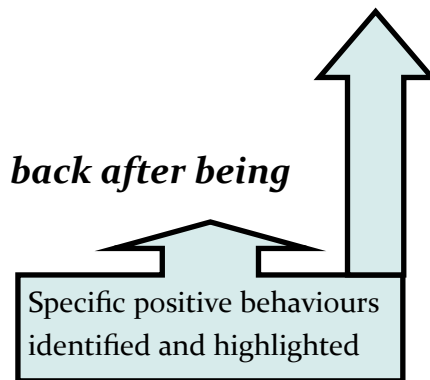
Practitioner: **you actually apologised didn't you** (0.2) so (0.8) on the one, on that offence you knew, that was out of order

Young person: yeah

Practitioner: **and you went** (0.2) **off your own back after being released didn't you**

Young person: yeah

Practitioner: yeah? okay



Example 7

Practitioner: ...we did speak a bit about (0.1) y'know (0.1) friends in general and stuff and what you told me was that erm (0.3) you're often the one to calm things down

Young person: (0.2) Sometimes not all the time

Practitioner: okay (0.1) **but the ability to do that** (0.2) **is really important, yeah?**

Example 8

Young person: are you sure it's that night 'cause I'm pretty sure someone started on me that night...

Practitioner: yeah but (0.2) I think it is the same incident because I think you mentioned that (0.6) was your ((relative)) was there so you decided in the end ((not to act))...**so it does show** (0.2) **y'know that you did use some of th-your thinking skills** (0.1) **because you put other people's** (0.4) **feelings** (0.6) **into the equation didn't ya?**

Section 6: Ensuring Understanding

Challenges

- Some of the words and phrases that occur frequently in interviews (e.g. “restorative justice”, “victim empathy”, “reparation”, “impulsivity”, “consequential thinking”) are complex for any young person to understand.
- 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

- Explain difficult words and phrases in simple, relatable terms, particularly those referring to the assessment/intervention (see **Example 9**).
- Ask questions about complex words and phrases in the intervention (see **Example 10**). This is a good way to check not only that a young person has understood these ideas, but *how* they have understood them.
- 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.

Section 6: Ensuring Understanding

Example 9

*Practitioner: would you say that you're an **impulsive** person in nature?*

Young person: what's that mean?

*Practitioner: erm impulsive means that, you **act first, and then think later***

Young person: ((laughs)) yeah

Practitioner: yeah?

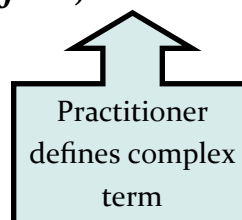
Young person: = yeah

Practitioner: = you're laughing [so] I'm guessin' it, sort of rings a bell

Young person: [yeah]

yeah

Practitioner: right okay, okay, can you think of an example you can give me?



Example 10

*Practitioner: er do you have difficulties using non verbal communication, [**do you know what that is?**]*

*Young person: [no]
no*

*Practitioner: **no** ((laughs)) so, non-verbal communication, it's your facial expressions hand gestures*

Young person: oh yeah

Practitioner: yeah so, you do use facial expressions and hand gestures when you talk? okay

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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