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Language-learning disorders and youth incarceration

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Abstract

Many speech–language pathologists are serving delinquent boys with language-learning disorders who are both current and former residents of correctional institutions. These youngsters demonstrate personal maladjustments that have a negative impact on school performance and socialization. Those boys within chaotic families are at risk of poverty, institutionalization, and substance abuse. Boys with language-learning disorders, who have encountered the law, need to be provided with services through collaborative and individualized efforts toward improving language skills, learning, and re-incorporating them into society. Further investigations are needed in order to clarify how the elements of personal, family, neighborhood, school and service conditions serve as either protective or risk factors for a life of incarceration in these individuals.

Learning outcomes: As a result of this presentation, the reader will understand the complex relationship among language-learning disorders, poverty, poor school performance, and delinquency in boys. The reader will become aware of the elements that should be present in school and correctional services in order to prevent recidivism in boys with language-learning disorders who have had problems with the law.

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1. Introduction

There are significant numbers of boys with language-learning disorders in the caseloads of speech–language pathologists. If they are boys from poor sectors, chaos, violence, and

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delinquency, negative models of behavior often characterize their families and neighborhoods. Many of these boys demonstrate serious problems with abiding by appropriate family, community, and social rules. This could stem from their difficulties in processing the language of socialization, and they might end up within the justice system. Correctional institutions, where these boys are sometimes placed because of delinquent acts, are required to provide special education and related services in a relatively short period of time (Burell & Warboys, 2000). To make effective use of this correctional time, with limited human and physical resources, speech–language pathologists, teachers, and other institutional personnel must intervene for confined boys with language-learning disorders based on evidence for this population. Judges often require these boys to go back to school, where they are expected to learn and behave better, but this is often not the case. Related issues are discussed below.

2. A FILIUS research project on language-learning disorders and delinquency

The FILIUS Institute for Disability and Rehabilitation Research is based at the University of Puerto Rico. With a research grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the author and Dr. Carmen Rodriguez, as the respective principal investigator and co-principal investigator, conducted the FILIUS investigation on the relationship between language-learning disorders and delinquency. In Puerto Rico, a large proportion of Latino boys with language-learning disorders are in confinement. We therefore sought to study what differentiates boys with this condition, who have faced a judge, from those who have not. Subjects included 19 boys with language-learning disorders in two schools and 17 boys with language-learning disorders who had come out of juvenile institutions. The average age was 17 years.

Using standard tests, questionnaires, and clinical observations conducted by a multidisciplinary team, it was found that boys with language-learning disorders who had never encountered the justice system, when compared with their delinquent peers with language-learning disorders, were characterized by:

- Having more home responsibilities;
- Anticipating more social and community participation in the future;
- Believing more in social support from others;
- Demonstrating more emotional balance;
- Having more life aspirations;
- Showing better school and family behavior;
- Anticipating more the consequences of behaviors;
- Demonstrating better auditory comprehension of discourse;
- Having better narration skills;
- Receiving more family support and supervision.

On the contrary, boys with language-learning disorders and delinquency demonstrated more outside work experiences, a serious substance abuse disorder and related family problems, and an undiagnosed attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity.

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