

Oracy APPG's 2019-20 Inquiry: *Speak for Change*

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This paper:

- Highlights the importance of non-verbal communication and understanding with regard to use of language in conversations
- Shows the impact on the child without the full development of these skills
- Calls for a concerted campaign promote non-verbal communication skills as an essential prerequisite of effective oracy

1. **Oracy and non-verbal communication**

- 1.1. The debate about oracy – the ability to express oneself fluently and grammatically in speech – focuses principally on talking. My professional experience has led me to the clear conclusion that effective oracy – speaking fluently and effectively in diverse circumstances – depends fundamentally on the 60-90% of communication which is non-verbal (Non-verbal Communication NVC). This key skill is poorly understood and overlooked in the general discourse about young people's communication.
- 1.1. This is the moment for the UK to take a lead and focus on the development of non-verbal as well as verbal skills to give children and young people the best chances in life. The consequences of not doing so are huge – so many common problems in behaviour, social and educational development, can be overcome by addressing the deficiencies in non-verbal communication skills in children and young people.
- 1.2. In this paper, I will demonstrate that the development of essential non-verbal communication skills will ensure children are capable of responding confidently and appropriately in a wide variety of situations benefitting their life chances in the context of education, work and family. I also propose a campaign to raise the profile and status of this vital work.

1. **Consequences of children not receiving effective oracy education**

- 1.1. If we accept that oracy embraces the fundamental skills associated with non-verbal communication a more appropriate question would be 'What are the consequences of children not developing non-verbal conversational skills?' These skills include tone, intonation, body language, gesture, contextualisation, etc., and are central to everybody's participation in conversations – spoken or written. They support the understanding and interpretation of meaning, emotion and relevance. A lack of facility to interpret situations, intentions or relationships seriously undermines a child's ability to communicate and can have a direct and damaging effect on behaviour, family relations, learning, employability and mental health.

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- 1.2. Non-verbal skills are normally acquired from birth through observation, example, repetition and reinforcement – for instance in the form of nursery rhymes, family conversation, various forms of play. In the last forty years a variety of changes in social norms and behaviour have meant that children have fewer opportunities to develop non-verbal communication awareness and skills.
- 1.3. One consequence of not developing these skills in early years is that spoken language outstrips the child's ability to a) understand what is being said to him/her and, b) know what the topic of conversation is and therefore talk and behave appropriately. Children who lack non-verbal skills typically exhibit the following behaviours: they may be subject to bullying (or become bullies), they shut down, avoid or flee situations they cannot handle, they become aggressive or depressive. All of which can be highly disruptive in family, school and other settings at a cost to the child's education, health and future potential.
- 1.4. Many children whose lack of NVC skills is undiagnosed and untreated end up needing psychiatric care, requiring special educational placement and/or being picked up by the criminal justice system.
- 1.5. It is important to note that a high proportion of children who lack non-verbal skills, often those who may be classified as 'on the autistic spectrum', nonetheless have a high level of verbal skill. They can talk well and at length on subjects of their own choosing. What they lack is the ability to respond to others, to handle emotions, to maintain conversation or to adapt to new situations.
- 1.6. JB (a boy I worked with in the 1990s) exhibited seriously challenging behaviour in school. His parents moved him from the state Primary to a private school because they thought smaller class sizes would ameliorate his difficulties. His disruptive behaviour continued and he was at risk of exclusion when referred to me. The school used a perfectly sound behaviour reinforcement programme in which JB took a card into each lesson and the teacher marked it at the end of the lesson with an upward, level or downward arrow according to his behaviour. All the marks on JB's card were downward. After a couple of sessions with me, JB ran in thrilled because he had received an upward arrow in one lesson. I asked him what he had received the arrow for and his response was 'I don't know'. It was quite clear that JB lacked basic non-verbal conversational skills as a result of which he was unable to understand even positive messages about his behaviour, lacked the skill to ask his teacher to explain and consequently failed to benefit from the school's strategy. After treatment JB was able to develop sufficient skill, did fine in class and ended his primary education well.
- 1.7. Another consequence of not developing these skills as a young child was demonstrated by single parent father with two small boys living with him who were about to be taken into care. I worked at improving the conversational skills of his children and, for two weeks, I worked with the father at the request of Social Services, developing his non-verbal communications skills. He was a very difficult man to deal with because he quickly lost his temper and became aggressive. At the Social Services meeting to decide whether he kept his children (ten weeks into my work with them) the staff

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were astonished to find that this troublesome client sat and listened to all the people talking about his children, said what he had to say clearly and with grace, and then waited patiently to hear the outcome. He got to keep his children.

- 1.8. There is no evidence to say that these problems only occur in one socio-economic group. On the contrary it is seen in all families at some level or another.

2. Impact on schooling

- 1.1. In order to benefit from education children need to be able to: a) be proficient conversationalists both as speakers and listeners, b) know what the teacher is saying and expects of them, c) focus and concentrate in the right circumstance, and d) work effectively in groups. Children with poor NVC are unable to do any of these things and, because they can often talk proficiently, teachers expect that their understanding is also at a proficient level.
- 1.2. These children need one-to-one attention. They prefer talking to adults as relating to groups of peers is too demanding. In order to survive in everyday situations they learn techniques to get themselves out of conversations. These strategies range from opting out (autism and perhaps stammers), being verbally dominating so that they can control the conversation, being verbally abusive if people don't pick up the signals from their earlier strategies, and finally they become physically aggressive and even resort to fleeing the situation.
- 1.3. All the children who have benefited from the Not Just Talking programme are able to: interact with their peers (they get their first invitations to play dates or parties), communicate their emotions appropriately and understand the emotions of others, sit still and listen. Because they are able to understand what is happening around them by correctly interpreting other people's intentions and emotions, they are able to respond appropriately, their behaviour improves and they are able to achieve their potential at school.
- 1.4. In terms of oracy, their speech is adjusted to give appropriate and relevant information in a manner that conforms with the situation. They become better communicators and proficient conversationalists.
- 1.5. Since NVC skills begin to be acquired from birth it follows that the earlier intervention occurs the more successful it is likely to be as children can adapt readily at an early age. A preventative approach is described in 'Not Just Talking: Help your child communicate – from day one' (Not Just Talking 2014). The majority of my work has been with primary age children but I have also achieved good results with teenagers and, occasionally, with adults.

3. Impact on future life chances and employability

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- 1.6. Children who develop good language skills but are unable to participate effectively in conversations because they lack facility with NVC, are at a disadvantage throughout their lives. This will restrict their ability to benefit from education and their employment prospects – many end up in careers that are not dependent on their communication skills, such as manual work or screen based jobs.
- 1.7. There is also a high risk of these children becoming caught up in the criminal justice system as a result of their inability to interpret and/or avoid situations of manipulation, coercion or danger, and failure to understand the consequences of things that others urge them to do. Their inability to pick up on subtle clues or to appreciate that certain actions will get you into serious trouble, makes them vulnerable to influence as a result of which they may find themselves inadvertently in danger or wrongly accused.
- 1.8. Once a child has developed good conversational skills, i.e. with a high level of non-verbal competence, their ability to engage with the world around them is immeasurably enhanced. This leads to a better understanding of their own potential and the possibility of developing aspirations commensurate with their capability. Children without good conversational development have very limited and more restricted choices in life.

4. Impact on wellbeing and mental health

- 1.9. The ability to understand your own emotions is the platform for being able to understand the emotions of others. It is a key attribute of well developed non-verbal communication skills. Children I've worked with tend to lack the skill to interpret even the most basic emotions – sadness, anger, happiness – and certainly have very little understanding of other more complex emotions such as frustration, sympathy, boredom, worry.
- 1.10. An inability to distinguish levels of emotion – discontent, vexation, anger, rage – often seriously limits their capacity to develop emotionally. As a result they do not have the benefit of knowing that they can prevent people from reacting increasingly severely by changing their own behaviour.
- 1.11. Thus their life experience is often one of constant anger and frustration which causes not only behavioural difficulties but severe mental pressures. Unless addressed this can lead to a spiral of mental ill-health with a consequent impact on family relations, educational attainment and wellbeing.

5. Barriers to providing well rounded oracy and non-verbal skills

- 1.12. Parents and teachers are frequently taught 'talk to your child and all will be well'. As a consequence they have little idea about the significance of developing NVC skills, how it underpins spoken language, and the huge impact that a failure to develop NVC skills can have on a child. This is not the fault of teachers or parents but results from a systemic and historic tendency to focus on verbal and oral skills at the expense of essential non-verbal skills.

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- 1.13. It has been recognised for some time that changes in the way in which we live our lives, particularly over the last four decades, have had a profound impact on children's normal acquisition of non-verbal communication. These include the introduction of forward-facing buggies, the move away from regular family meals around the dining table, introduction of screens, etc, all of which deprive children of the opportunity to directly observe and absorb communication behaviour, especially non-verbal cues, body language and so on.
- 1.14. Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) is based on understanding verbal language and speaking it. Children's ability to listen and speak tend to be promoted to the detriment of promotion of their non-verbal communication skills. However, if a child's language outstrips their non-verbal understanding the consequences can be dire; they will be unable to distinguish the key words in a sentence that, supported by non-verbal understanding of the situation, topic, relationships etc, ensure that meaning can be accurately shared.
- 1.15. In developing the pioneering Not Just Talking programme I have acquired significant anecdotal and video evidence of its effectiveness in making major changes in the behaviour and prospects of hundreds of children. I have had several proposals for developing evidence-based research to validate the theory and methodology I've developed, but the funding for this research has never been forthcoming. As a result it has proved immensely difficult to secure the support that would ensure non-verbal communication is embedded in teaching, speech & language therapy and other relevant disciplines. Hence my subsequent focus on writing books aimed mainly at parents.
- 1.16. Practitioners (teachers, therapists, midwives) very quickly develop an understanding of the importance of this work and an enthusiasm for it. In my work since the 1990s just doing an introductory session for teachers helps them to look at the problems children present in a completely different way.
- 1.17. I gave a presentation to about 500 Speech & Language therapists (SLTs) a few years ago. After showing them videos I had of autistic children developing well through my programme I was overwhelmed by interest at the end. Having trained as a SLT myself, I was very frustrated that we took children out of class to develop speech and language but generalisation of the treatment was very slow and attention to non-verbal skills sometimes non-existent.
- 1.18. What is required to overcome these barriers is a concerted campaign to:
 - 1.18.1. put the development of non-verbal communication skills on an equal footing to language development
 - 1.18.2. develop a properly funded robust evidence-based research programme to validate non-verbal methodologies for assessing and teaching non-verbal skills

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- 1.18.3. promote understanding of non-verbal communication within appropriate professions (teaching, speech & language therapy, psychiatry, midwifery), and provide appropriate training.

Sioban Boyce Biography

Sioban trained and worked as a Speech and Language Therapist in the National Health Service (NHS) from 1978 until 1996. On leaving the NHS, Sioban set up Not Just Talking and developed the NJT assessment and intervention programme for children with communication/behaviour difficulties.

NJT was contracted to Hampshire SEN Department for four years. Subsequently she worked in private practice through parent referrals. Her work was championed by Dr Richard Fry, Consultant Child Psychiatrist, who realised that many of the children referred to him could be successfully treated by NJT without the need for medication. Sioban trained a team of NJT specialists to continue the work with Dr Fry. She is now retired and lives in Dorset.

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