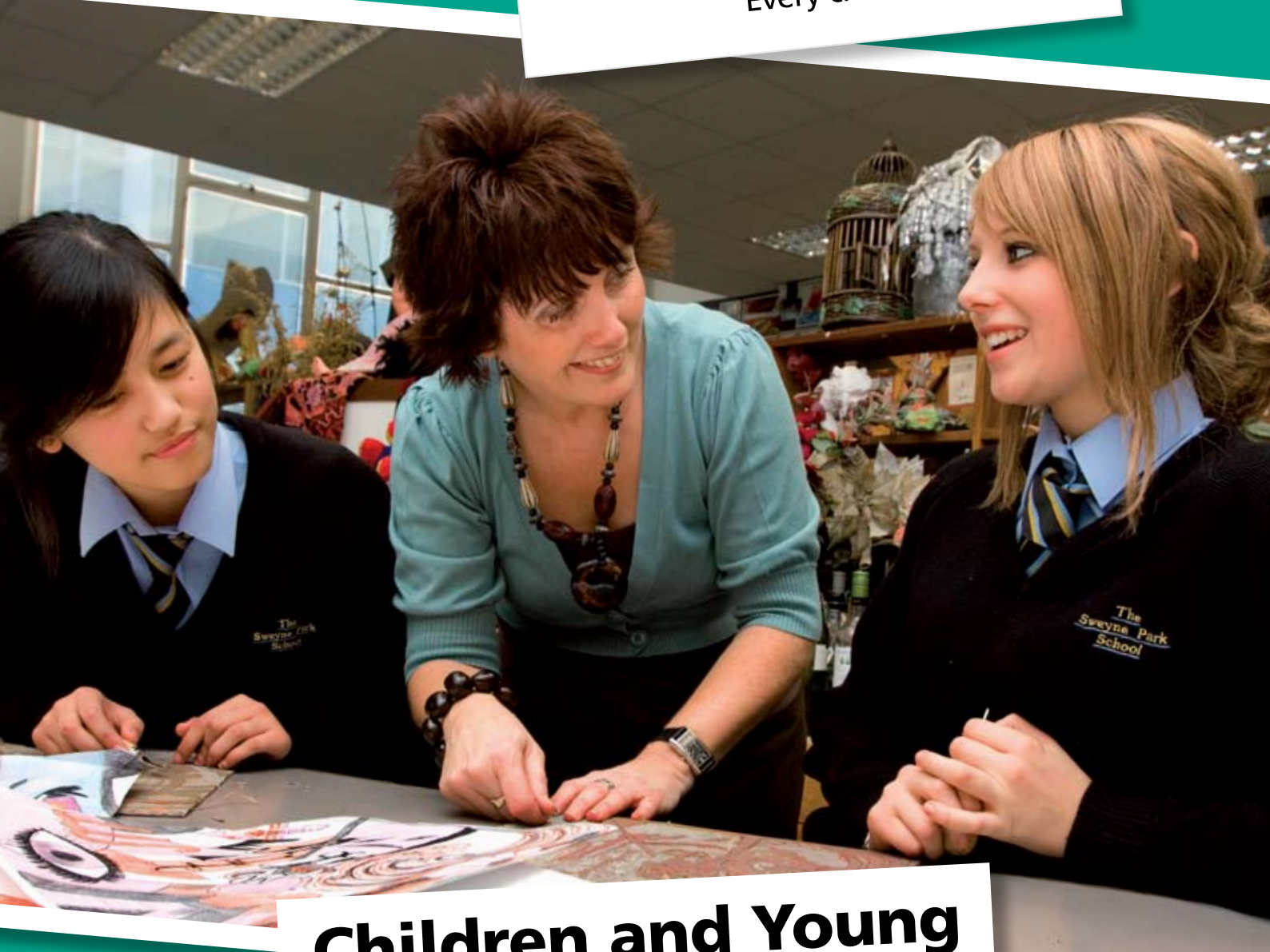




**The Communication Trust**  
Every child understood



## **Children and Young People's Views**

What do children and young people think about speech, language and communication skills?

# What do children and young people think about speech, language and communication skills?

The Communication Trust supports the children's workforce in developing skills relating to speech, language and communication development in children. The Trust wants everyone working with children and young people to be able to encourage good language and communication skills and to spot anyone who is struggling.

So... we want to find out what young people think.

## We asked young people...

- Are communication skills important?
- Do communication skills need to be taught – or do they just happen anyway?
- Do teachers have a role in teaching these skills?
- What can teachers do to support your communication skills?
- What are your top communication tips for teachers?

## Who did we talk to?

- We talked to young people in groups and by themselves, some were pupils in mainstream schools, others in a special school, others were in social groups.
- About 70 young people told us what they thought.
- They were aged between 11 and 23.
- Eight of these young people had communication difficulties.
- All were still in education; mainly school or college and a couple at university.



## What did we do?

- We explained to the young people why we wanted to talk to them.
- We took notes and tape recorded some of the sessions.
- We checked with the young people that we understood what they were telling us.
- We told them we would write a report, but their names, or other people's names they mentioned wouldn't be included.
- They were encouraged to discuss the questions and ask about anything they were unsure of.

## What did we do with all the information?

- We looked at all the information and picked out ideas that were similar in the different groups and interviews.
- We then went back through the information and found things young people had said which supported those ideas.
- We then put that information in this report, so you will see:
  - the questions we asked
  - the ideas young people talked about
  - examples of what the young people said



“Good communication is one of the most important skills anyone could have.”

“When you have a teacher who makes you feel valued, who always listens and encourages you, it's incredible.”

## What did the young people tell us?

To make sure we were all talking about the same thing, we started off with a question about communication skills...

### We asked... What do we mean by communication skills?

They talked about speaking, listening, understanding and taking turns. A couple of young people said you have to know how to talk to different people in different ways, especially in secondary school and that there are different rules, phrases and words used in secondary.

**"You have to be able to express yourself well. But you have to balance this with the ability to listen and try and understand the ideas of other people.."**

**"You need to know when and how to listen – loads of people just don't."**

"Children should always be encouraged to talk, to write, to forge bonds with other people: that is how we grow."



## **We asked... What do you think about communication skills? Do you think they are important?**

All the young people we spoke to said that it is really important to have good communication skills. They said they often take these skills for granted and felt most of the people around them did the same. Many of the young people described situations when communication had broken down, with friends, family or teachers. They went on to say why they thought they were important.

### **They said communication skills were important for living:**

**“Good communication is one of the most important skills anyone could have..”**

**“Oh my God, it just affects everything.”**

### **For growing:**

**“Children should always be encouraged to talk, to write, to forge bonds with other people: that is how we grow.”**

### **For doing well in life:**

**“We need communication skills to get jobs, interviews, for later life.”**

### **For emotional / social reasons:**

**“If you have good communication skills, socially it gives you more confidence.”**

*“With the best teachers, the lesson revolves around the discussion.”*

*“You need to be able to say your ideas or nothing will get changed.”*

### **For getting things done or getting what you need:**

**“You need to be able to communicate to get what you want... in a good way.”**

**“We need communication skills to control things and get things done.”**

**“You need to be able to say your ideas or nothing will get changed.”**

There was also a lot of discussion about how people make judgements based on how you talk; they felt adults judge young people because of words or phrases they use, and young people judge each other for the same kinds of reasons. Some of the young people said that could be difficult:

**“First impressions... you’re judged on how you talk and how you interact.”**

**“In high school everything is different, conversations are deeper, less trivial, more mature; attitudes are different, there’s just a different way of talking and looking at things... You have to swear more and get to know new words and phrases.”**

### **They talked about how frustrating it is when you can’t make others understand what you have to say:**

**“It’s frustrating if you can’t interact and get your message across in the way you want to.”**

**“If you can’t express your views then you don’t get listened to.”**

**“If you have difficulties you might be judged as being not very intelligent.”**

## **We asked... What can adults do to support communication?**

We asked young people to think mainly of their experiences and examples in schools. They talked a lot about how adults should speak to students – for all young people we spoke to, that meant not too much teacher talk, explaining information clearly and giving pupils time to respond. All of this was really important to young people with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) too.

**“Give pupils a chance to answer or comment. Wait – maybe even 5 minutes, don’t interrupt until we’re ready, nod and give eye contact”**

They talked a lot about adults listening to students and having lessons which were fun, engaging and allowed students to practise their communication skills. They said they all learnt more in lessons where they can do practical activities.

**“Teach us how to debate and have discussions in every lesson – let us practise the skills, you get better if you practise”**

They thought teachers need to know who their students are and understand what helps them. For pupils with SLCN, this meant:

**“Teachers need to understand pupils and what helps them”**

For other students it was simpler:

**“Spend time getting to know pupils – remember their names”**

We really wanted to find out from young people what made a difference to them, to think a bit more about what teachers can do to support communication in young people, so...

**We asked... Think of a teacher you know who is really good at communicating with students, someone who is good at encouraging you to use your own communication skills. What do they do that works?**

They thought it was important for teachers to make sure everyone is involved in the lesson, give clear information, encourage group discussion and not talk too much.

**“With the best teachers, the lesson revolves around the discussion. They don’t speak for hours and hours.”**

**“They know how to explain so all the class understand – they ask and check it out – they show things in different ways.”**



*“Teachers need to understand pupils and what helps them.”*

### Personalised learning/attitudes

Some of the children and young people said it was important to feel the teacher knew them as individuals, not just as a class or year group. They came up with lots of examples of teachers making them feel valued and listened to, which was important. A good teacher...

**“Recognises who is shy and encourages them to join in... asks different people in different ways... understands the pupil – as a person... tries different tactics to suit different individuals... allows interaction in the classroom... is open to questions... includes everyone in the class.”**

All the young people we spoke to said how important it was for teachers to be able to talk about their subject:

**“They are enthusiastic about what they are teaching – it’s in their voice – it really makes you want to learn.”**

They also said how important it was for teachers to be in charge of the class:

**“Other students can be a problem - teachers need to deal with it, some just let it go, then you don’t feel like saying anything next time.”**

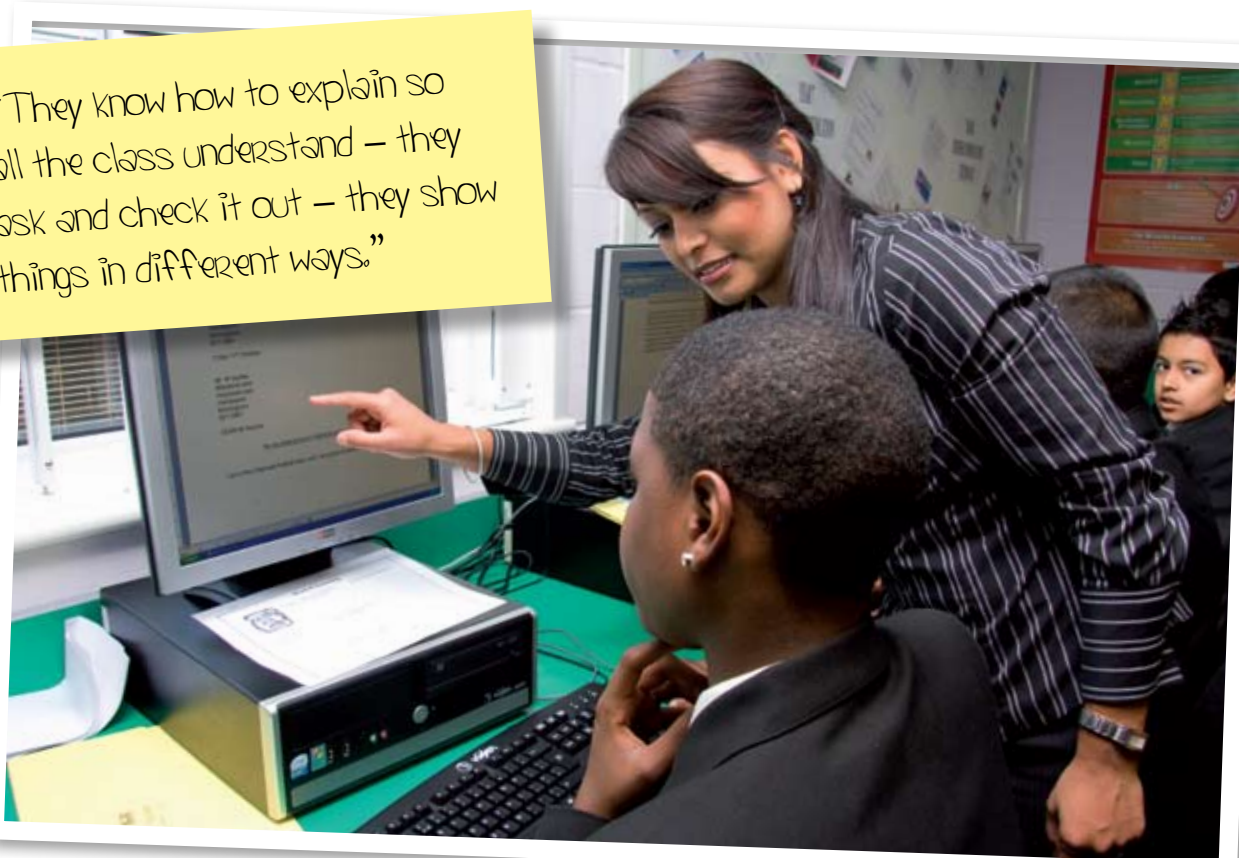
All the students had examples of what different teachers had done to support and encourage communication in the classroom – as they were talking, some young people commented that all the things important for communication also helped them learn and be part of the lesson.

**“They asked a question, then talked about it, reworded the question and it turned it into a discussion, it really helped our learning.”**

**“They do different things – they took us outside...had us spinning round and round...threw a ball out of the window to teach gravity... made songs up in maths... we went onto the moor when studying Wuthering Heights...”**

**“They clarify things and give you time. One of our teachers in every lesson they ask everyone a question.”**

*“They know how to explain so all the class understand – they ask and check it out – they show things in different ways.”*



**We asked... Do you think young people need to be taught communication skills, or do these skills just develop anyway?**

Most young people felt they did need to be taught these skills. One of the groups felt they just needed opportunities to practise the skills they had, rather than being taught them directly.

**"I think it's really important that young people are not only taught to speak in public well but also to think on their feet and hold good conversations with all kinds of people."**

**"I think it would be really useful 'cos you would use it in every day life. You use it all the time; it's not like a waste of time."**

**"I think we just need more chance to practise..."**

For the young people who felt the skills should be taught more directly, we wanted to see whether they felt school was a good place for this to happen, so we asked two questions:

**We asked... Who should teach these skills?**

The importance of family was clear:

**"I think the most important people in a person's development are their parents and close family. When a child has a supportive family who they can talk to, they already have a huge head start."**

Though the young people realised that not everyone had these opportunities:

**"...but the sad truth is that some children just don't."**

*"When you have a teacher who makes you feel valued, who always listens and encourages you, it's incredible."*





## **We asked... Should communication skills be taught by teachers?**

Some thought it was a better thing to learn than other subjects...

**“Probably better off learning about that than a lot of things you learn at school, ‘cos you’re guaranteed to use it, you know.”**

Others commented on how important teachers are and the value of listening to students:

**“When you have a teacher who makes you feel valued, who always listens and encourages you, it’s incredible.”**

*“It’s worth spending the time; it’s preparing people for life.”*



Lots of young people talked about the pressures already on teachers:

**“Teachers are just too busy with paperwork and teaching the curriculum to think about teaching communication skills as well.”**

**“It should be part of everything we do, but it will mean a big change in thinking. Teachers are really focused on their subject and teaching.”**

And some made suggestions for bigger changes:

**“It should be incorporated into the system, how the curriculum is written.”**

Although there was lots of talk about the difficulties of making such changes, most young people felt it was important to try and do it:

**“It’s worth spending the time; it’s preparing people for life.”**

**“If not at school, then where would people learn these skills?”**

Finally, we wanted to know what the most important things were for young people:

**We asked... If you had a chance to tell teachers honestly what to do to encourage communication skills in class, what would be your top tips?**



**1. Communicate with pupils:**

- a. Appreciate everyone has an opinion, even if they are wrong
- b. Speak to pupils as individuals/people
- c. Ensure the way they (teachers) speak isn't too complicated or patronising, speak at the right level for pupils
- d. Think about the language they are using
- e. Listen to pupils

**2. Know and understand pupils:**

- a. Relax and just treat them like normal people
- b. Encourage the quiet ones to speak, but don't press
- c. Know names and personalities

**3. Make an effort to include everyone in class:**

- a. Treat everyone equally, don't have a teacher's pet, it's really obvious and really irritating
- b. Be fair

**4. Not a lot of teacher talk**

**5. Make lessons fun and amusing:**

- a. Do things in lots of different ways
- b. Be enthusiastic about your subject

**6. Encourage questions:**

- a. No working in silence, people will be scared to ask questions
- b. Tell pupils – 'put your hand up if you don't understand'

**7. Be good at explaining**

**8. Encourage pupils to speak with each other**

- a. Have discussions and debates in class

**9. Make sure you are in charge of the class:**

- a. Deal with students who are misbehaving

**10. The most important thing is not to judge anyone**

## **We asked... Is there anything that teachers definitely should not do or anything that just doesn't help?**

1. No shouting – shouting shouldn't be used in teaching, it's not effective
2. Don't waste time on misbehaving kids
3. Don't ramble, or go off topic – get the balance right between giving information, but not too much
4. Don't put people on the spot and be forgiving
5. Don't assume, check out with the class what they understand
6. Don't joke around then the next minute be really serious – you are sending mixed messages
7. Don't be really crazy, it's really irritating
8. Don't be insensitive
9. Loads of writing doesn't work
10. No silence

## **Conclusion and key points**

1. Some young people hadn't really thought much about communication skills before we talked about it, though clearly showed how important they felt these skills are.
2. They gave many different reasons why communication should be supported.
3. Many felt these skills could be taught in school, but recognised the challenges.
4. Young people were able to identify what worked for them to encourage and support communication skills.
5. They were able to say what didn't work.
6. There was a huge overlap between what was considered to be a good teacher and a teacher good at supporting communication skills.



“They clarify things and give you time. One of our teachers in every lesson they ask everyone a question.”

## How will The Communication Trust use this information?

- We will include what young people have told us to inform the work of the Trust, for example, sharing top tips with work we do in schools.
- We will draw out the themes into a checklist to support planning of the work we do.

**A big thank you goes to all the young people who shared their views and experiences – they were all a pleasure to talk and listen to and had some incredibly interesting and insightful comments to make.**



**Wendy Lee** conducted this consultation. She is a registered speech and language therapist with an MSc in advanced speech and language therapy practice and advanced professional diploma in teaching and learning in higher education. Wendy has worked predominantly for the NHS for over 20 years, working with children with a wide variety of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) across the age range, as an advanced practitioner and team leader.

Wendy also worked as a lecturer with undergraduate speech and language therapists and continues to be involved in training in SLCN for teachers and speech and language therapists. She has worked since November 2007 as one of the professional advisers to The Communication Trust and has been involved in a number of Trust projects.

# Supporting Information

**The following section gives more detailed information on the consultation, expanding on information already presented and giving details of how the consultation took place.**

## Background

The Communication Trust<sup>1</sup> believes in the fundamental importance of speech, language and communication skills for all children and young people and the challenges faced by those who find communication difficult.

The Trust is working to raise awareness of this issue in the children's workforce. The Trust believes a skilled and supported children's workforce, confident in their knowledge of children's speech, language and communication, is crucial to ensuring all children develop these essential skills. The Trust aims to support the children's workforce in developing their knowledge and skills in this area.

## Why consult with children and young people?

Children's right to have their voice heard is one of the guiding principles of the UN convention of the rights of the child<sup>2</sup>, a principal reinforced throughout UK legislation, in respect of all children<sup>3 4 5</sup> with additional legislation related to special educational needs<sup>6 7</sup>. Children have firsthand experience of their own lives and as such can make contributions in a way that no one else can.

Children have been 'keen, constructive and thoughtful commentators on their everyday lives'. Including them as active participants has been evidenced as not only possible, but productive<sup>8</sup>.

It is important that the process of consultation is meaningful and not just a token exercise. This can be a particular challenge for children with significant communication difficulties<sup>9</sup> as there are inherent difficulties in enabling children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) to contribute in the same way as their peers. Communication difficulties are frequently given as the reason why disabled children are not consulted<sup>10</sup> and in some cases the views of children with communication difficulties are often ignored<sup>11</sup>.

The Trust wants to ensure the voice of young people is represented in its work; we are keen to find out the views of children and young people themselves in relation to speech, language and communication and to include young people both with and without SLCN.

## Methods

The aim is to capture the opinions of as wide a group of young people as possible and to ensure we do this within a good practice framework of consultation<sup>12</sup>.

## Young people

Young people were recruited on the whole from the Trust membership organisations. They were given information about the aims of the

1 [www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk](http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk)

2 United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989): [www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm](http://www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm)

3 *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (DfES 2004), 4 Children Act (1989), 5 Human Rights Act (1995),

6 DfES Code of Practice (2002)

7 Disability Discrimination Act (2005)

8 Prout, A. (2002); *Researching children as social actors: an introduction to the children 5-16 programme*. *Children and Society* 16, 67-76.

9 Owen, Hayett and Roulstone (2004); *Children's views of speech and language therapy in school: consulting with communication difficulties*. CLTT

10 Dickens, M., (2004); *Listening to young disabled children*. National Children's Bureau

11 Ward, L., (1997); *Seen and Heard: Involving disabled children and young people in research and development projects*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation

12 Clark, A., Quail, S., Moss, P., (2003); *Exploring the field of Listening to and consulting with Young Children* Thomas Coram Research Unit, DfES

consultation, issues around consent, anonymity and reporting and were asked whether they would be prepared to be consulted based on what it would entail. Some were individuals and others were members of a specific group. Five groups responded and agreed to take part. One group of around 28 students was consulted through their class teacher via written information sent from the Trust. This had been developed through consultations with young people which had been carried out up to that point. In addition, a number of individuals agreed to either a telephone or face to face interview.

A total of 71 pupils were consulted, 43 of them directly through focus groups or interviews. Four focus groups were consulted directly, with a total of 38 young people involved, 8 of whom had severe and complex SLCN. One class of children were consulted through written questions and 5 through individual interviews.

The young people were aged between 11 and 23, the majority of which were still at school with a spread across key stages 3 and 4 and a number of young people in further and higher education.

### Measures/procedure – Data collection

The process was carried out within a robust framework to ensure the opinions were objectively gathered and representative of the young people we spoke to. There were strategies in place to ensure there was constant checking with young people to ensure we had clearly represented their views. Informed consent was gained before the interviews, by the young people themselves and/or an appropriate adult. Before each session, they were given information again about the

Trust, aims of the consultation, issues around confidentiality and consent as well as methods of reporting. They were informed they did not need to continue and could choose not to answer any questions at any point.

The main data collection techniques were through individual interviews and focus groups, talking in detail to relatively small numbers of children and young people. A questionnaire was designed as part of the process, though the young people involved expressed a preference for giving their opinions directly through the focus groups and therefore the questionnaires were not extensively used. A semi structured approach to the interviews and focus groups was taken in order to introduce an area of discussion and enable the young people to comment and discuss in whatever way they chose. They were also encouraged to think of specific scenarios, situations and or people in order to help think about the issues.

Within the consultations, a range of methodologies and approaches were available to ensure all young people were able to contribute<sup>13</sup>. The interviewer was a qualified speech and language therapist with expertise in interviewing children and young people with a wide range of communication needs, as well as typically developing children and young people. The process of data collection has been an iterative process where initial consultations informed subsequent ones. Where possible, sessions were tape recorded and extensive field notes were taken in each session.

### Data analysis

Data from the consultations has been transcribed and analysed to identify recurring themes, issues and ideas. These have

13 Clark, A., Quail, S., Moss, P., (2003); *Exploring the field of Listening to and consulting with Young Children*. Thomas Coram Research Unit, DfES

been supported by direct quotes from the young people involved. As we agreed both confidentiality and anonymity at the beginning of each session, names of young people are not used against the quotes given.

## Results

Initially within each session, there was some discussion around what we all mean by communication skills; the aim was to find common language and definitions around the subject. On the whole the information was directed by the young people involved with support and facilitation by the interviewer.

## Discussion/future work

Further consultations would aim to involve a wider range of children and young people, to include more young people with SLCN and a wider age range. Ideally, all sessions would have been taped or videoed and future consultations would aim to do this. We did develop a questionnaire, though it was not extensively used. There is the potential to develop a more interactive and accessible questionnaire in order to gain the views of a wider number of young people.

## Resources to help your work

We have the resources to help the children's workforce deliver the outcomes the children have outlined in this report and through our members can signpost to other relevant materials and publications. We have developed a framework, the Speech, Language and Communication Framework (SLCF), which identifies the skills and knowledge necessary to support children's communication effectively and signposts to relevant training. This can be completed online at [www.communicationhelppoint.org.uk](http://www.communicationhelppoint.org.uk)

We have a number of useful publications available to order for free including Explaining Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN), which explains in simple terms what SLCN are and how to support the children and young people who have difficulties with communicating.

## Next steps

The purpose of The Communication Trust is to raise awareness of the importance of speech, language and communication across the children's workforce and to enable practitioners to access the best training and expertise to support the communication needs of all children. The young people we spoke to felt communication skills were key to their development and life chances. They highlighted the strategies that some teachers already use to support communication in the classroom, though felt this needed to be more universal. They felt a need to be taught these skills in school, though were aware of the pressures on teachers and suggested a more systemic change alongside a recognised need for teachers to develop some of the knowledge and skills needed to develop communication skills in the young people in their care. We have drawn out the key themes of young people's views and will use this as a guide to ensure their views are taken into account in the future work of the Trust.

## Conclusions

The young people involved were incredibly insightful and interested in talking about communication skills. Their comments and suggestions will help shape the work of the Trust in both current and future initiatives. Please visit the website [www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk](http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk) for more details.



**The Communication Trust**  
Every child understood

The Communication Trust was founded by Afasic, BT Better World Campaign, Council for Disabled Children and I CAN, who now form the programme board together with Scope and The Children's Society. The Trust is a coalition of over 30 voluntary and community sector organisations working in the field of speech, language and communication. The Trust is funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families and other funders.

[www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk](http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk)