

Research looks to help children with social communication difficulties

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New research led by The University of Manchester aims to help children with 'hidden' speech and language problems.

Children with social communication disorder (SCD) find it hard to understand and use language, especially in social situations. Although they may be quite chatty – so their difficulties aren't always spotted – their problems expressing themselves and understanding others can affect how they do at school, their friendships and their emotional and mental health. Children with SCD might lack tact, have difficulty in telling a story so it can be understood and struggle to understand others. They may also have autistic traits.

The study will train NHS speech and language therapists in a new intervention, specifically designed to give [children](#) new language and social skills. The Social Communication Intervention Programme (SCIP) was developed by one of the UK's leading experts in this field Dr Catherine Adams and Research Speech and Language Therapist Jacqueline Gaile, both based at The University of Manchester. It has been tested on a small scale in schools, where teachers and parents reported it led to improvements in children's social and learning skills.

The research, funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Research for Patient Benefit Programme, will also look at how many children in England are affected and what sort of help they are getting, as it's a condition that hasn't always been recognised.

One parent whose views have helped to shape the research is Clare Cusack, whose son Tomas, 16, has SCD with elements of autism. He has worked with Jacqueline for five years. Clare said: "Tomas has had to learn the social rules that come naturally to others, such as being persuasive or having a reciprocal conversation. One size doesn't fit all with conditions like these – it's really important that the help he gets is completely sensitive to his needs. Learning these skills has made him more independent and given a voice to his personality, so that people can get to know the real Tomas."

The work is a collaboration between Salford Royal, Dr Hazel Roddam at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) and The University of Manchester, where Dr Adams is clinical senior lecturer in speech and language therapy. She said: "We know there is an association between these communication problems and behavioural difficulties that continue into adolescence. These can have huge repercussions and affect the whole family.

"We very much hope that this intervention, which looks at individual children's needs, will help to bring about long-term improvements and we will be consulting with parents and therapists to make sure it is of value to them."

The study is also breaking new ground in the way results will be measured – because the 24 primary school children who will be involved have different needs, individualised aims will be set up and progress measured against these.

Dr Adams added: "We are trying to bring changes in practice and give [speech](#) and [language](#) therapists new skills. SCD is still something of a hidden problem and there may be different awareness and approaches to dealing with it in different areas of the country."

Salford's child Speech and Language Therapy service provides assessment, therapy and intervention for children with communication impairments, including children with autism and social communication disorder. It is also active in research.

Provided by University of Manchester

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