

A European initiative aims to ensure fair trials for children and young people with special language needs

December 4 2023, by Sònia Armengou Casanovas



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Nearly 70% of children and young adults who face the justice system for committing a crime have serious language difficulties that affect their

comprehension and expression skills. This severe disorder leaves them defenseless or unable to fully exercise their right to be heard and, consequently, exposed to harsher sentences than individuals without this disorder.

Most of these [young people](#) are undiagnosed, so both they and the judicial system are unaware that they suffer from this disorder. This means that measures and resources to help them better understand and cope with the process in which they are immersed cannot be introduced.

With the aim of remedying this situation, a Europe-wide project has just been launched involving the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) to help young people facing the judicial system to have a fair trial. This means that they should be able to understand why they are being tried and to respond accordingly, given that court proceedings are based on procedures that require a high level of verbal ability.

"They are people who find it difficult to even understand short sentences, so imagine them being subjected to the rhetoric and complexity of legal language, which makes it so difficult even for individuals without this problem to understand the information given to them in this context," said speech therapy expert Alfonso Igualada, Ph.D. in [language sciences](#), member of the UOC's Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences and researcher with the Cognition and Language Research Group (GRECIL, UOC/UB), affiliated the Neurodevelopmental eHealth Lab of the UOC's eHealth Center.

This four-year project is called Justice to Youth Language Needs: Human Rights Undermined by an Invisible Disadvantage (Y-JustLang). A total of 23 European countries are currently involved, and it forms part of the COST initiative (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).

The project promotes actions that put researchers and organizations in contact with the aim of putting certain social issues on countries' agendas. As a result, Y-JustLang involves researchers, judges, pediatricians, and professional associations linked to the judicial system, among others.

A silent disorder

Developmental language disorder affects about 7% of the population. It is characterized by severe and persistent difficulties in understanding and expressing language. "Children find it difficult, for example, to arrange words in a sentence according to the rules we use in a language," said Igualada, who explained that if it is detected and treated early, the symptoms improve. Otherwise, this disorder can have a severe long-term impact emotionally, socially, and academically.

"Language is the tool we all use to socialize, learn, or get a job," said Igualada, who added that children with this disorder are often bullied and can have significant social difficulties. In addition, it is a somewhat invisible disorder since most children suffering from it tend to be quiet and not establish much communication, which means they are often mistaken for introverts.

The Y-JustLang project stems from an initial collaboration between the UOC and various universities led by researcher María Arche from the University of Greenwich, focusing on language development in adolescents and youth.

Language plays a key role because it is the tool we use to communicate with our families, school, and colleagues and to find a job; when there is an undiagnosed and untreated disorder, the risk of failure at school, of being bullied, and of being unable to find a job increases, and this is so even more if the person is from a disadvantaged socio-economic

background.

Greater risk of social exclusion

Due to this chain of events, several studies carried out in English-speaking countries have shown that language problems are up to six times more prevalent in under-18s who commit crimes. In addition, if these children who commit crimes have not been diagnosed and treated, the risk of reoffending increases.

"There's a disproportionate number of young people with language disorders in the [justice system](#), and this is what has driven the launch of this project," explained Igualada. "Research has shown that judges give harsher sentences to people with this difficulty. This can be explained by the fact that, because they don't quite understand what they're being told, they often remain silent or give meaningless answers when asked, and judges can interpret this as not collaborating or as not taking things seriously."

The project, which has only just begun, is split into six working groups, each of which will try to contribute knowledge about a specific area. The first group focuses on learning more about language development in adolescence and early youth. The second one will analyze recordings of police and judicial interactions with teenagers to detect difficulties in understanding and communication breakdowns. The third group will draw up an inventory of language disorder assessment tests in the various EU countries.

The fourth will aim to draw up a set of characteristics of these young people and see the risk factors. The fifth group will focus on the legal frameworks of the various countries and on what regulations should be put in place to help these youths. and finally, the sixth group will focus on disseminating and raising awareness of the problem.

The project is coordinated by a management committee composed of two people from each country. In the case of Spain, the committee members are Alfonso Igualada from the UOC and Josep Quer from Pompeu Fabra University. Their task will be to make decisions that affect how the project moves forward. As a researcher in the UOC's GRECIL group, Igualada will be involved in the research on [language development](#), in the inventory of [language](#) disorder assessment tests, and in disseminating and educating people about this problem.

Provided by Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC)

Citation: A European initiative aims to ensure fair trials for children and young people with special language needs (2023, December 4) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-12-european-aims-fair-trials-children.html>

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