

Narrative Discourse in Youth Offenders: Examining Content and Complexity

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Abstract

Background: Adolescents in the juvenile justice system (youth offenders) frequently have language disorders that restrict their ability to express themselves accurately, clearly, and efficiently and to understand the language spoken by others. For example, they may have difficulty telling about events that happened to themselves and to others and may struggle to interpret the long and complex sentences spoken by authority figures (e.g., police officers, judges, attorneys, teachers, counselors). As a result, they may experience difficulty learning new skills, following directions, benefiting from counselling, and communicating with others harmoniously. Unfortunately, language disorders in youth offenders often go undiagnosed and therefore untreated. For this reason, it is essential that professionals evaluate the language skills of adolescents in juvenile detention and provide the appropriate intervention, as needed.

Purpose: This study examined narrative discourse in youth offenders, focusing on quality of story retelling, story comprehension, and the use of complex syntax.

Method: The participants were 15 incarcerated adolescents, ages 13-18 years old (mean age = 16 years). Each was evaluated at their detention center via Zoom, using a norm-referenced standardized language test and language samples that elicited narrative discourse with fables. After retelling a fable, the participant answered questions that examined story comprehension.

Results: Most participants performed below average on the standardized language test and had difficulty on one or more of the language sampling measures. Areas of concern included quality of story retelling, story comprehension, and the use of complex syntax in narrative speaking. Had language sampling not been employed, those weaknesses might have been overlooked.

Conclusions: When evaluating youth offenders, it is important to elicit language samples that can provide detailed information about their ability to communicate for genuine purposes. The tasks employed in the current study could be helpful in pinpointing deficits prior to intervention.