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ABSTRACT

*Oral language deficits and the young offender:
Implications for literacy, social skills, and restorative justice*

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Young offenders are at risk for a number of adverse developmental outcomes and face a range of social and educational barriers. Problems with literacy, social skills and behaviour are well documented, however until recently, underlying oral language (talking and listening) abilities have been under-explored in the population. In this paper, our recent research examining the oral language skills of male juvenile offenders serving community-based orders will be described. We have examined these skills in nearly 100 young offenders and have identified high levels of previously unrecognised impairment, which cannot be accounted for by IQ differences between the young offenders and controls. Our findings show a significant link between oral language deficits and violent offending; further, young offenders in regional Victoria performed more poorly on some measures than their offending counterparts in metropolitan Melbourne. These findings have significant implications for the ways in which interventions for young offenders are conceptualised and delivered. In this presentation, particular emphasis will be placed on implications for literacy programmes, social skill training, and restorative justice. There will also be some consideration of the implications of our findings for forensic interviewing (investigative and evidentiary).