

## Why do you think you or your team deserves to win the Plain Language Champion — Best Individual or Team award?

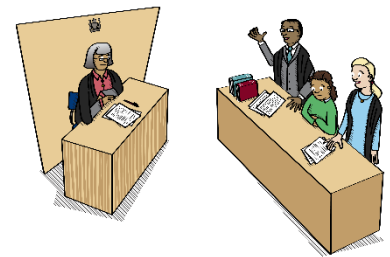
### Who are we?



We are a team of speech-language therapists. All our work at Talking Trouble Aotearoa NZ is about making communication easier for people.

We aim to make spoken language and written language easier to understand and we help people to have their say about things that are important to them.

The stakes are high in the context where we work. We work in courts, prisons, care and protection settings, schools, health settings and police contexts.



### Why is our work important?

Society and organisations can disadvantage those who struggle with speech, language, or communication through a preference for overly complex processes, information, and interactions.

All people, regardless of their age, status, ability, or communication skills have the right to understand information, hold opinions, and express themselves. We all have the responsibility to uphold each other's right to accessible communication to ensure equality, justice, and dignity. The right to accessible communication is enshrined in legislation such as Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Articles 13 and 21 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The Talking Trouble team cares deeply about plain language and effective communication.

Communication can be very challenging for many people in legal settings like court, police interviews and legal meetings. The talking and the written language is often very complex and confusing for people.



### What do we do?

Our work is about raising awareness of communication challenges and helping to find solutions, so people can understand and express their views.

1. Our team provides professional development for practitioners and policymakers within care and protection, justice, and mental health settings across New Zealand and internationally to help them recognise the linguistic complexity within their conversations, assessments, letters, forms, and processes.

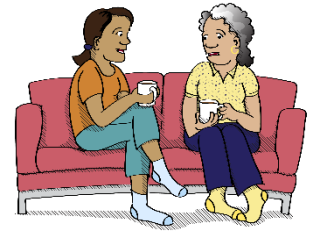


We help them reflect on the complexity of the vocabulary, grammar or sentences they use, the volume of oral or written information they expect people to process, the concrete or abstract nature of the topics they need to discuss.

We show them strategies they can use to make it easier for people to engage with the information they are trying to give or get, and we give them opportunities to practice those strategies. We help them develop more effective resources that are easier for people to understand.



2. We consult participants in justice settings to hear their experiences of communication (the language, forms, and processes) within those settings. They tell us about the barriers to effective communication they have experienced.



**Young people in youth justice told us, it was more challenging when adults:**

- Use big, flash words and talk for a long time.
- Use sentences that were too long and complicated.
- Expect them to read things that are too complicated for them to understand.

**A participant in our ‘Language of Protection Orders’ research told us:**

“The papers are just the same over and over. It’s real small writing and some big-as legal words and just looks like they are saying the same things so you don’t know where to look for things that are important.”

The project report is available here: <https://www.talkingtroublenz.org/projects-and-reports/the-language-of-protection-orders>

We ensure practitioners and policymakers in those settings hear what users of their services have told us about language and communication that *does* and *does not* work for them. This authentic feedback is powerful and often motivates organisations and practitioners to adapt the language they use and the way they provide or gather information.

3. We are engaged as Communication Assistants to work with people in legal contexts e.g., children, young people or adults who need to participate in police interviews, court hearings, the Parole Board, Family Group Conferences, and other legal meetings or interactions. We make sure people can understand what is being said or what is written, and can have their say.



Every day, in our work, we simplify and design documents to make sure people can understand information. These are created for individuals – we use what they have told us about what works for them and does not work for them, and what we have figured out from our specialist knowledge of supporting effective language and communication. We also create information and resources that other professionals can use and adapt in their work.



### **What impact has your work, or your team’s work, had?**

We consistently hear feedback from organisations and practitioners about how our work has motivated them to re-think how they communicate and therefore improve the quality of the communication they have with the people they serve. They tell us about what they have done differently or consult with us about what they could do e.g. a judge who attended training with us, then devised a simplified bail conditions form. The judge has sent the form to us to get feedback on how it might be further improved for communication accessibility.

#### Comments from other practitioners:

“It was not until CAs (Communication Assistants) became involved in cases that I started to understand how language difficulties impact on young people who come before the Youth Court. That has led me to re-think how I communicate with all young people I meet in court and to see an urgent need to change the language, forms and processes we use to make them capable of being properly understood. This must go beyond simply removing the anachronisms and institutional language; New, fresh and meaningful approaches are required.”

HH Judge Fitzgerald (NZ)

“Generally, the FGCs (Family Group Conferences) got a lot of legalese, complicated words and processes - I think we lose our families and kids very early on in the piece. ... Because the presentation (information to be discussed during the FGC) was simplified in terms of language ... and pictures helped (the young person) piece everything together ... you could see that he was able to make an informed decision. Most of our kids would benefit from this style of FGC.”

Youth Aid Officer from the Police

These comments above are from practitioners working with young people, but we also work with young children and with adults. Whatever the age of the person, it is important they can participate in the communication involved in their lives.

Across Aotearoa New Zealand, as a result of our work, many practitioners now:

1. Consciously choose the words and language they will use to explain complicated information so the communication will be a good ‘fit’ for the people they are working with.
2. Have abandoned complex standardised letter templates and replaced them with simpler letters which make it easier for the reader to engage with the key information.
3. Use compensatory communication strategies to help their service users focus, understand, and keep track of important information. (See handouts on [Effective Communication in FGCs](#) and [Actions to take to improve communication accessibility in legal spaces](#))
4. Use simpler visual templates to convey important information such as bail conditions, outcomes of important meetings and so on. (See [bail conditions templates](#) attached.)



However, whilst it is rewarding to hear the impact our work has on practitioners, it is even more satisfying to hear the impact our work has on participants who access care and protection, justice and mental health settings.

For example, at the end of a court hearing one young person told his Communication Assistant:

"I want to say thank you for helping me to understand what's going on, like what's happening in Court, I reckon I wouldn't be here now if I didn't understand all that... I know that I can know stuff now so that's mean."

More insights into the impact communication assistance has for young people, whānau and practitioners in legal settings can be found here:

<https://kellyhoward2.wixsite.com/youthjustice>

There is much more work to be done. Many organisations still can't see how their complex language and processes privilege some members of our society whilst marginalising and disempowering others.

However, the progress we've seen is encouraging; we're making a difference.

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Documents (below and on the links provided in this document) demonstrate the work our team does to help people make sense of oral and written information.

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- The 7 cards which form our Top Tips Cards set are often used by us when delivering professional development so practitioners can consider what they might change about the communication involved in their own contexts. The green card shows the way a bail template might be adapted.

## Easy read

**Bail conditions = the rules the Court has given you**

- ⊗ If you break the rules you are in trouble the Police will tell Court
- ✔ Keep the rules and finish your plan

You have to live at  
22 Ward Street  
Nan's

Your curfew at Nan's

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
Stay home	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Go out							
Stay home	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔

Be home by Shortland St

You can hang out with  
Nan  
Auntie Mei  
Rangi  
At course  
Your SW + Youth Advocate

You can **not** hang out with  
Nate  
Tama  
AJ

You can NOT see them  
You can NOT phone them  
You can NOT email them  
You can NOT speak to them

You have to go to  
Course - M, T, W, Th, F  
Counselling  
Rangi's sessions  
Court

You are **NOT** allowed to have alcohol

You are **NOT** allowed to go in any place that sells alcohol

You can go in supermarkets

You are **NOT** allowed to take any drugs

- NO smoking drugs
- NO eating drugs
- NO injecting drugs

You can take medicine from the doctor or the pharmacy

**NO** violence

**NO** threats

**NO** fighting


### Who needs an easy read version?

We all benefit from clear, easy to read information. Written information stays still and can be read again.

But reading can be challenging for many young people. So can concepts of time.

Is the information being given on paper at the right level?

Consider space, layout, colour, the amount of information, pictures, flow charts and diagrams.



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The orange card shows how we might design a document using images and key written words to help explain a complex legal concept such a charge e.g. the charge of 'possession of instruments for conversion'.

## Break it down

"You are charged with Possession of Instruments for Conversion."

**Charge**

Possession of Instruments for Conversion

Charge = what the Police say you did

**You had things to use for stealing a car**

Screwdriver  
Vicegrips  
Tools

Very serious

pocket

in your hand

bag

on your body

### Look out for jargon

### Explain it


What words might be confusing?

Write down the jargon word or phrase if you need to use it

Explain it simply

Draw it

If it is important, make sure you check it now makes sense



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Keep your  
**communication  
glasses  
on!**



## Look through your communication lenses at the situation

Listen to yourself – how are you communicating?

Is that working well?

How is the young person communicating?

Is there anything that can be changed to make communication easier?



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Do you understand?

Got that?

All OK?

That makes sense,  
doesn't it?

Yep, all good

## Watch out – are you checking understanding effectively?

Most of us won't say when we are confused or unsure. We do not want to feel shamed or stupid.

Try asking young person to tell you what they think you said.

Review and write it down.



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## What's the young person's behaviour communicating?



## What is a young person's behaviour communicating to you?

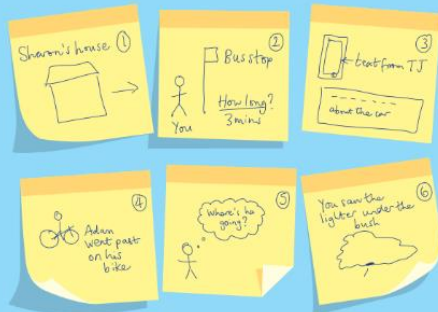
Consider why. Think about...

- |                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| culture                        | diagnosis of a condition or disability |
| what's their first language?   | sensory overwhelm                      |
| hearing and vision             | trauma experiences                     |
| attention and listening skills | mental health                          |
| head injury                    | vocabulary and language gaps           |
| fear, shame, anger, distress   | literacy                               |

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## Doodle with purpose



**No art skills required!**

## Provide something for eyes to focus on

Listening can be hard.

Try stick people and key words. Speech and thought bubbles.

They give a shared, concrete focus for your conversation.

Post-it note comic strips can help sort out a muddled sequence of events.



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## What is this about? How long will it take?

What this is all about...	
The things we need to talk about/decide are...	1) 2) 3)
We are going to talk for _____ minutes	
We will finish at _____	
I can have a break. I can tell _____ I want to stop.	
I can say if people are not making sense or I want them to say something again.	

## What is this about? How long will it take? What was that all about?

How will they let you know if it is not making sense?

Did you check at the end that they knew what that had been all about?

Do they know what is going to happen next?



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2. We also developed another set of cards for practitioners to use to help them consider the views young people gave about the communication involved in Youth Justice contexts: Youth Voices in Youth Justice cards.

<https://www.talkingtroublenz.org/s/Youth-Voices-about-Youth-Justice-All-Postcards>