

Effectiveness-Supporting Methods, Strengthening the Soft-Skills and Communication Competences

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ABSTRACT

Strengthening the communication competencies of professionals who come into contact with children, and a wider knowledge of children's individual needs and age characteristics is an important prerequisite for the fuller enforcement of children's rights. The declaration and guaranteeing of children's rights is an important prerequisite at the level of legal regulation affecting different areas of law, but their actual practical implementation depends on the knowledge of the professionals with whom the affected age group comes into contact. Recognising this is an important step forward at both international and national level. This will not only mean greater protection for children and wider recognition of their specific needs but will also make cooperation between relevant professionals and institutions more effective. Therefore, complex training programs are important in all relevant fields, which aim to develop 'soft-skills' such as communication, problem-solving or the ability to cooperate in addition to 'hard-skills'.

KEYWORDS

communication competences, soft-skills, child-friendly communication, general key competence in justice system, speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), system-abuse, institutional violence

1. First Impressions and Communication

Training professionals working in institutions that come into contact with children is an important prerequisite for legal and professional operation. In addition to theoretical knowledge, it is particularly important to strengthen those competencies and individual abilities, the lack or limitation of which can have a number of negative effects, both directly and indirectly; ultimately, it can lead to the failure or obstruction of the enforcement of children's rights.

For young people who come into contact with the authorities – regardless of their current role – the professionals working there represent adult society, the state itself.

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Both the experience of stigma and psychological victimization (whether in concrete form in criminal proceedings or through secondary victimization) can cause disappointment, a feeling of abandonment and hopelessness. This loss of trust can have a lifelong impact on children's attitudes towards adults, authorities and, ultimately, on their attitude towards following the rules (i.e. law-abiding behaviour). The impact of such failures and negative experiences on both the mental state and the later behaviour of young people is very significant. If the institution does not function well, if the authorities do not cooperate well, if the problems are systemic, then ultimately these not only impair the efficiency of the justice system, child protection, etc., but also lead to phenomena such as abuse of the system or institutional violence. In these cases, the authorities that should represent or protect the interests of children (including, in addition to child protection, education, justice, health care, social institutions, etc.) do not, or do not perform their duties well, abuse their power, or "just" function dysfunctionally. These anomalies can ultimately violate the rights of children and cause traumatic experiences for those involved, even though the professionals involved do not necessarily commit a violation of the law.

The experiences of children who come into contact with authorities depend significantly on the communication and problem-solving skills, empathy and patience of professionals.

The level of communication competence and the ability to speak one language is of paramount importance in the context of (especially criminal) justice. In the field of criminal justice, not only the effectiveness of evidence, the enforcement of internationally recognized and declared children's rights, or the enforcement of principles specifically related to criminal proceedings (such as the principle of fair trial) must be taken into account, but also the effectiveness of criminal proceedings and crime prevention – ultimately achieving the fundamental criminal policy objectives of improving public safety and ensuring the well-being of the host society and children.

Strengthening the soft skills of professionals, supporting their conflict management skills, etc. is a recognized goal at both international and nation-state levels.

As a good practice, we can focus on the results of Hungarian judicial training to date. In relation to other actors of the Hungarian justice system – such as the police, the legal profession or the prosecution – there have also been, albeit at different levels, recognition of the need for the expansion of practical knowledge, the most active in this area has been the judge training and the Hungarian Academy of Justice. More competence-building programs (with a scoring value) should be needed in the other legal profession.

2. Definition and Types of (General) Competences

Given the specifics of the target group, it is important to clarify that competence is more than a skill¹. It is a skill, a competence, an aptitude – that is, the ability to successfully solve a complex task in a given context. Accordingly, its elements are the mobilization of knowledge, cognitive and practical skills, social and behavioural components, as well as attitudes, feelings and values.

According to József Nagy², general competence is a set of psychological components that are necessary for the everyday individual and social existence of every person. Within this, personal, social and cognitive competences are known. Specific competence is special knowledge, the task of which is to create a state change for the benefit of oneself and others. It includes special abilities, habits, skills and knowledge.

The three elements of the general key competence, which are relevant to the topic and are interconnected, are communication, cooperation and problem-solving competence: communicative competence is the ability of an individual to exchange information in a common set of signs in the interaction of two or more people; it includes the expression of feelings, awareness; it also includes elements such as authenticity, empathy, non-manipulative or non-game/game/trauma communication; it has now been extended to the ability to use information and communication technologies and the need for digital literacy; cooperative competence is a set of skills based on the cooperation of participants, which can be mobilized to achieve different goals and which also plays a significant developmental role in self-assessment and problem solving; it includes elements such as social behaviour, logical reasoning and inference, and debate culture; important principles of cooperative competence include individual and shared responsibility, equal participation, supportive cooperation and parallel interactions; problem-solving competence is the ability to apply cognitive processes in real situations; consists of identifying, understanding, representing, then solving a problem, and communicating the solution; it includes analytical, quantitative, analogical, and combinatorial thinking.

3. The European Framework of Judicial Competencies

The importance of competencies is demonstrated by the fact that they are also regulated at the member state level, in line with international expectations.

The framework and main directions of specific Member State solutions are determined by the Union strategies. The evaluation of the earlier (2011–2020) European

1 Somogyvári, 2015, pp. 61–68.

2 Nagy, 1996, p. 206.

judicial training strategy³ shows that overall the strategy has achieved most of its objectives. The flagship target of training half of all legal practitioners (i.e. 800 000⁴) on EU law between 2011 and 2020 was reached in 2017⁵. The strategy has helped to increase the number of training activities, but also promoted new types of activity, such as exchange programs. It has helped improve training on EU law for several categories of legal practitioners, especially judges and prosecutors. It has also built the capacities of networks such as the European Judicial Training Network (EJTN) and reinforced EU-level networks and training providers⁶.

The next Strategy – „Ensuring justice in the EU – a European judicial training strategy for 2021–2024” set out a number of new objectives. In doing so, the needs of the various legal professions were also taken into account. It was important to involve as wide a range of professionals from the field of justice as possible. Thus, although the primary objective was to train judges and prosecutors, the strategy covered all legal professionals: court staff, lawyers, notaries, bailiffs, mediators, legal interpreters and translators, court experts, and – as a new target group – partly prison staff and probation officers.

The annual report of the European Commission about the European judicial training⁷ informed about the fact, that it could be observed the decreasing tendency in connection with the training activities on EU law. (It means, that under 50% of judges and prosecutors participated in continuing training activities on EU law⁸ – although between 2011–2023 the number of participated justice professionals from the EU is more than 2 million⁹.) As EU law training has been a priority for many years, Member States have extensive experience in training methodology. Drawing on this, a number of good practices can be named, for example on the field of innovative training methodology from Romania (Recording, Broadcasting, Online Podcasting, Recording and Transcription of Training Activities and their Availability on the Internet¹⁰) or Bulgaria (Comprehensive Online e-Learning Strategy¹¹), on the field of

3 European Commission, 2019.

4 In 2011, half of the practitioners in the EU would have equalled 700,000, whereas in 2018, half of legal practitioners was approximately 800,000. These calculations are based on the data of the CEPEJ Reports regarding the number of legal practitioners in the EU Member States. European Commission, 2019.

5 European Commission, 2020a, p. 1.

6 Ibid.

7 European Commission, 2024.

8 Ibid., p. 3.

9 Ibid., p. 5.

10 See more: IT-25. Romania: Pilot Project - European Judicial Training: “Lot 1 – Study on best practices in training judges and prosecutors”, carried out by the European Judicial Training Network.

11 See more: IT-22. Bulgaria: Pilot Project - European Judicial Training: “Lot 1 – Study on best practices in training judges and prosecutors”, carried out by the European Judicial Training Network [Online]. Available at:

https://e-justice.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2014-06/IT_22_Bulgaria_EU_en.pdf?id=e831eee0-1f88-497f-9d8e-91c9e8e527b9 (Accessed: 28 October 2025).

training tools to favour the correct application of EU law and international judicial co-operation for example from Hungary (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia) (Judges and Prosecutors from Neighbouring Countries/Regions are Trained Together in EU Law (and Language), Reflecting the Existing ‘Operational Co-operation’¹²) and on the field of training needs’ assessment for example from Croatia (Assessing Regional Training Needs¹³). The researchers are constantly monitoring the needs of professionals, related to EU law¹⁴.

Despite the extensive experience and knowledge related to the trainings, the Strategy strongly emphasized: the training of lawyers lags behind that of other legal professionals, and this gap must be filled.

The Strategy made some important findings and set objectives in relation to competences („Necessary components of practitioners’ training beyond EU law”¹⁵):

1. European judicial training should go beyond legal education and support the development of professional skills. The law and legal principles do not function in a vacuum, so justice practitioners need to acquire multidisciplinary competences.
2. While it is a national responsibility, training in ‘judge craft’ (the set of skills and attitudes of being a judge) is central for the efficiency of justice, the relationship of trust between justice systems and members of the public, and trust between practitioners in cross-border cooperation.
3. Key training topics for judges include judicial conduct, resilience, unconscious bias, case and courtroom management, and leadership.
4. In addition, to acquire the requisite know-how, attitudes and expertise, all justice practitioners need training on non-legal knowledge and skills, e.g. as provided by behavioural sciences, psychology, anthropology, economics and cognitive linguistics.
5. The development of legal language skills is essential to enable smooth dialogue between practitioners, which in turn promotes mutual trust in cross-border judicial proceedings. Mastering foreign languages helps justice practitioners to understand foreign legal systems and concepts and increases participation in cross-border training activities.

It should be emphasized that the Strategy also referred to the importance of children’s rights. The rights of children, the rights of people with disabilities and adaptation of

12 See more: ITT-39. Hungary: Pilot Project – European Judicial Training: “Lot 1 – Study on best practices in training judges and prosecutors”, carried out by the European Judicial Training Network.

13 See more: TNA-05. Croatia: Pilot Project - European Judicial Training: “Lot 1 – Study on best practices in training judges and prosecutors”, carried out by the European Judicial Training Network.

14 See more about the results: European Commission, 2021.

15 Ibid., pp. 5–6.

justice systems to these groups, the specific challenges faced by victims of gender-based violence – all appeared as featured areas¹⁶.

(It is worth highlighting that under the new EU Strategy on the rights of the child, the Commission committed to propose in 2022 a horizontal legislative initiative to contribute to training of justice professionals on the rights of the child and child friendly justice, in line with the European judicial training strategy for 2021-2024, and through the European Judicial Training Network (EJTN), the Justice and CERV programs, as well as the European Training Platform of the EU e-justice portal and to strengthen the implementation of the 2010 Guidelines on Child-friendly Justice with the Council of Europe.¹⁷)

Although the focus of the trainings is on hard skills – including knowledge of EU law or children rights – the strengthening of soft skills was also an objective of the judicial training strategy for 2021–2024. The significance of these is particularly important in relation to the enforcement of children’s rights in practice.

On 11–12 June 2025 the European Judicial Training Network organised its 2025 General Assembly, over hundred delegates gather to shape the future of European justice. The European Commission, on 12 August 2025, published a call for evidence on the 2025–2030 European Judicial Training Strategy.

Further development of the European Strategy for Judicial Training 2025–2030 and close integration with the Digitalisation Strategy for the Judiciary¹⁸, which will entail increased training activity in digital competences, including AI. The gap of digital competencies is relevant. Until 2024 only 4,9% of the reported training activities focused on digitalisation and AI, for continuing training, 2,5% on digitalisation and AI and 24% on IT-skills¹⁹.

4. Competence-Strengthening Among Judges – One Good Example

The Hungarian judicial training, which can be identified as a good practice, – based on this content competence – provides a wide range of services in a complex way, striving to strengthen hard skills and soft skills together, and from a geographical (central, local/regional, self-educational) and methodological point of view. Although shifts in focus can be observed, child-centred justice, for example, remains in focus.

From 2020, iCorso – i.e. the Electronic Court Training Registration System – will provide additional support for trainings, significantly simplifying their transparency, the organization, planning and availability of trainings, for example. In addition to

¹⁶ European Commission, 2020a.

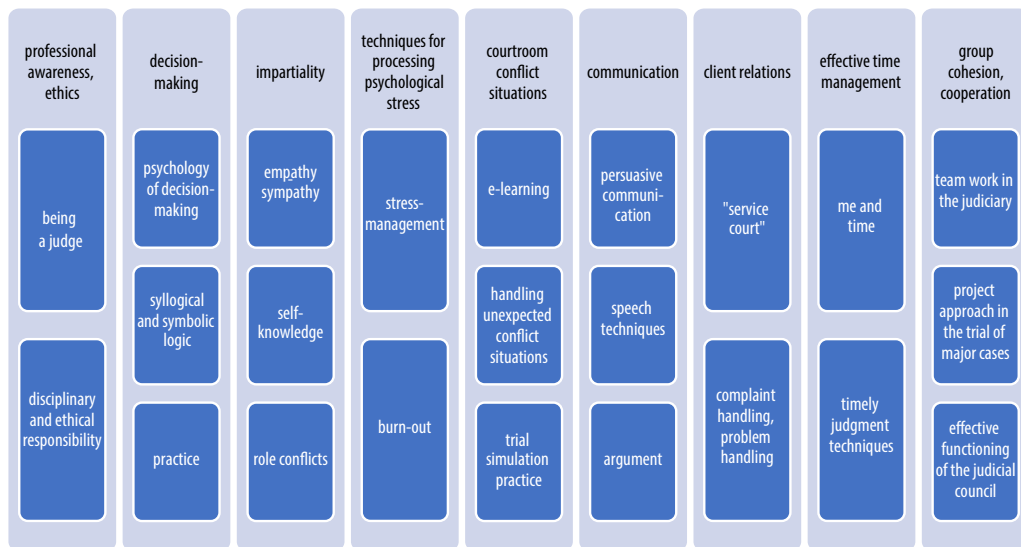
¹⁷ Child-friendly justice: Thematic area 4 of the EU strategy on the Rights of the Child EU actions to support justice systems that uphold the rights and needs of children. See more: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/child-friendly-justice_en (Accessed: 28 October 2025).

¹⁸ Bitkom, 2025.

¹⁹ European Commission, 2024, p. 3.

the possibility of self-education, bachelor's training, professional training, competence development and international training courses are also available.

Figure 1. Complex training system to strengthen the communication skills of justice experts²⁰



In recent years, significant efforts have been made in the field of training of judicial professionals, in particular in the area of judicial training, which can be identified as good practice and is also a priority. As can be seen from the decisions of the President of the National Office for the Judiciary concerning the annual educational plans²¹, the training programme is not only complex in terms of its subject matter and the targeted competencies, but it is also mutually based on and mutually reinforcing in terms of time, regional availability and the facilitators of the training. It was developed in the 2010s in several phases²²:

1. 2014: basic training for lecturers; teaching the first module of each competence to future instructors (15–15 people); preparation of two e-learning courses;
2. 2015: teaching the second module per competence for future teachers; organization of trainings; at local level: launch of the first modules; launching e-learning courses;

20 Author's own work.

21 82.SZ/2023. (X.5.) NOJ decision on the 2024 central education plan.

22 Director of the Hungarian Academy of Justice (2014) '2014.NOJ. XXXVI.C.1.1./6. Information on the training programme of the Hungarian Academy of Justice on 17 March 2014 – for the period from 19 December 2014', p. 4.

3. 2016: teaching the third module to future trainers on competences where the third module already existed and could be taught locally; at local level: the promotion of the second modules;
4. 2017: launch of further master's programmes if necessary; centre (Budapest): launch of third modules; at local level: launch of third modules (where possible).

Information about competencies was available not only in the form of trainings, but also through other programs and events. (For example, on 16–17 October 2014, the MIA organised an international conference entitled “Court and Communication”.)

In addition to judicial professionalism and ethics, decision-making, impartiality, communication and rhetorical skills, client relations, effective conflict management, team cohesion and cooperation, the competence trainings for judges²³ also dealt with (newer) topics such as effective time management or the management of psychological stress. These are also indirectly important, as inadequate management of stress, for example, can lead to burnout.

Training programs have recently expanded not only in their offer, but also in their availability. In addition to on-site in-person trainings, complex online platforms are also available, specially adapted to the needs of the target group. In 2025, in addition to profession-focused trainings, ICT-based (e.g. presentation techniques, IT competencies) programs strengthening foreign language competencies were also available to applicants, in addition to the previous main topics²⁴.

5. Competence-Training for Police Officers and the Question of Specific “Police-Personality”

At the same time, the training palette of other actors in the judiciary is not so structured. The competence map of each profession may be different, so the training of professionals operates on different bases and within a different framework. Thus, for example, professionals working in the penitentiary system, who spend their working hours indoors and in a very strictly regulated manner at the level of legislation, have to be strong in other competencies (such as psychological endurance and emotional intelligence) than a lawyer, for example. „Qualification and know-how of personnel – both educational and psychological – is necessary to reach adequate professional decisions and steps, and optimal solutions in spite of risky conditions.” – writes Barbara Fibiné Babos²⁵.

23 82.SZ/2023. (X.5.) NOJ decision on the 2024 central education plan.

24 See: Draft 2025 Central Education Plan [Online]. Available at: https://birosag.hu/sites/default/files/2024-12/2025._evi_oktatasi_terv.pdf (Accessed: 14 May 2025).

25 Fibiné Babos, 2020, p. 7.

In terms of the ability to communicate with children, the police play a particularly important role. This institution is the gateway to the entire system of justice. Whether the minor is a victim, a perpetrator or ‘only’ in a moral danger zone, he or she gets his or her first impressions of the authority in this context. Although there are of course different training tasks and methods due to the professional tasks of the police, the question has been raised at the international level as well: is there a separate, specific “police personality”? Although²⁶ research does not uniformly establish the existence of special police personality, it has unanimously proven that there are personality traits that make people more likely to choose this career.

It appears that in terms of the Temperament and Character (TCI) dimensions, police officers are lower on the novelty seeking (NS), harm avoidance (HA) and cooperativeness (C) subscales, while the self-directedness (S), persistence (P) and self-transcendence (ST) subscales scored significantly higher compared to the control groups. A recommendation for competence development was already made in 2018, but its practical implementation is not common. Larger-scale competency-focused training is primarily carried out on a campaign basis, in relation to projects for staff.

Other research²⁷, such as the Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R) questionnaire, reported that police officers scored significantly higher average scores on the Sociability, Sense of Duty and Consideration subscales compared to firefighters who appeared as a control group.

And the research conducted with the Big Five Inventory questionnaire²⁸ highlighted the significantly higher Emotional Stability values of police officers (interestingly, however, they were less likely to avoid conflict than the control group). Overall, police officers have proven to be much more conservative, not showing much openness, especially to new experiences.

Competence training for police officers is also ongoing in Hungary. One of the good examples is the 2007 Twinning project²⁹, which provided basic competence training for 4,000 Hungarian law enforcement professionals (i.e. included police officers).

6. Competency-Map of Institutions – Similarities

The process of adjudication presupposes the successful cooperation of several institutions for a common great goal³⁰. This would mean that all professionals involved would have to meet the same competence expectations.

Although the “European judicial training strategy for 2021-2024” itself states that the characteristics of the field must be taken into account when training professionals, it contains little further information in this area.

26 Malét-Szabó et al., 2018, pp. 17–18.

27 Ibid., p. 18.

28 Ibid.

29 Hegyi, 2016, pp. 29–30.

30 See more details: Váradi-Csema, 2023, pp. 87–142.

It is up to the Member States to determine the necessary steps to achieve the desired result. In Hungary, for example, their frameworks are setting out in the annexes of Government Decree No. 10/2013. (I. 21.)³¹: the Evaluation Sheet of Competence-Based Work Behaviour (Annex 3) and the Competence Map of Performance Evaluation (Annex 4).

The concept of competence formulated by the law is of a general nature. According to this, competence is the combination of knowledge, proficiency, skills, abilities, social roles or values necessary for the performance of public service tasks, self-image, personality traits that help employment and motivation for efficiency.

Individual professional areas are able to formulate special competence expectations through different laws – if there is one. Staying with the Hungarian example:

1. Decree of the Ministry of the Interior on the recommended elements of the performance evaluation of the professional members of certain armed forces under the direction of the Minister of the Interior, the procedural rules related to the application of the recommended elements, the order of qualification and the evaluation of organisational performance (No. 26/2013 (VI.26.)³²),
2. Decree of the Ministry of the Interior on the performance evaluation of judicial employees employed by judicial expert institutions (No. 30/2020 (VII.31.)³³),
3. while, for example, the Act LXVIII of 1997 deals with the service relationship of judicial employees³⁴.

While in most cases the annexes contain the specific competencies (expected and assessed), the detailed rules for the performance evaluation of judicial employees are set out in the regulations of the President of the National Office for the Judiciary (NOJ), for example, in the case of judges.

The NOJ Instruction on the Performance Evaluation of Judicial Employees (No. 10/2018 (XII.19.)³⁵) distinguishes between basic and professional competencies. Basic competence is the general preparedness, knowledge, proficiency, skills, ability, and all the personal characteristics necessary for the performance of the duties and position, as well as the sum of all the personal characteristics that affect work performance, while professional competence is the specific skills, skills, abilities and personal characteristics that affect the work performance of court clerks, court clerks, clerks, clerks and managers, other than the basic competencies.

31 Government Decree No. 10/2013 (I. 21.) on individual performance evaluation in public service.

32 Decree No. 26/2013 (VI. 26.) BM on the recommended elements of performance evaluation of professional staff members of certain armed forces under the control of the Minister of the Interior, the procedural rules related to the application of the recommended elements, the classification system, and organisational performance evaluation.

33 Decree No. 30/2020 (VII. 31.) BM on the performance evaluation of judicial employees employed by the forensic expert institution.

34 Act LXVIII of 1997 on the service relationship of judicial employees.

35 10/2018. (XII. 19.) OBH instruction on the performance evaluation of judicial employees.

To what extent do the uniform public service competence requirements correspond to the competence needs of the specific institutions that arise in practice? A Hungarian research³⁶ compared the basic police competencies and the Unified Public Service Core Competencies. The conclusion of the wide-ranging study is that the two competency rankings are very similar to each other both in terms of the entire test sample and only in terms of the police sample. The 11 most important core competencies identified: 1. Decision-making ability 2. Problem-solving skills 3. Responsibility 4. Sense of rules, discipline 5. Cooperation skills 6. Situational awareness, insight into the essence 7. Psychological endurance 8. Communication Skills 9. Conflict management 10. Independence 11. Striving for quality. This also means that it is worthwhile and necessary to define a uniform collection of basic competencies for public service.

At the same time, it is also exciting to see that the competencies defined (and expected) by the interviewed practical law enforcement professionals are partly different: The numbers before the behavioural traits indicate the corresponding competencies as follows: 1. Self-development skills 2. Sense of rules, discipline 3. Flexibility, adaptability 4. Decision-making ability 5. Cooperation skills 6. Responsibility 7. Problem-solving skills 8. Conflict management 9. Communication skills 10. Self-confidence, self-confidence 11. Independence 12. Ability to control oneself 13. Psychological endurance 14. Empathy 15. Striving for quality 16. Performance orientation 17. Organisational skills 18. Creativity 19. Situational awareness, insight into the essence.

7. The Importance of Competencies and Some Advice to Youth Justice Practitioners

The soft skills of professionals working in any area of the judiciary – especially their communication competencies – fundamentally determine the experiences, possible victimisation, traumatisation – and ultimately psychological satisfaction – of the children who appear there. Of course, this is also true for other professional fields, such as child protection.

In connection with the latter, it is worth mentioning³⁷ the competency-focused research of Leinonen et al. with traumatized adolescents professionals appearing in substitute care, and their experiences of encountering the institution.

36 Malét-Szabó et al., 2018, pp. 27–28.

37 Leinonen et al., 2023, pp. 339–356.

Figure 2. Essential elements of youth care³⁸

Elements of the encountering			
Affective	Institutional level: power structures in communication	Individual level of the professional: professional's individual ways of work	Individual level of the adolescent: adolescent as a unique individual
Cognitive	Trauma-informed approach	Knowledge of the psychological development of an adolescent	Know-how on substance abuse issues
Behavioural	General communication skills: can be taught via education	Endogenous abilities and internal skills: impossible to attain via education	–
Ethical	The respect of human dignity	The appropriateness of the welfare professionals' comments	The adolescents' possibility to maintain autonomy in the interaction

All this means that all communication competencies – and individual elements of it separately – are detected in the case of children who meet the institution. In all cases, their role in certain elements of competence is particularly decisive, since the majority of children who come into contact with any actor of the judiciary are themselves injured, wounded actors who require particularly sensitive treatment. But even in the absence of this, due to the operational characteristics of the judiciary, appearing there can cause anxiety, stress, fear and uncertainty in young people who are not familiar with the process and do not understand the language, but from whom a formal procedure expects active participation.

Minors have special speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).³⁹ However, recognizing and identifying this is not only an expectation in connection with new trends that focus on children's rights, such as trauma-informed youth justice or the sensor-focusing lawyering.

The SLCN has typically very high frequency in the youth justice population. Youth justice practitioners should approach their work with the expectation that the young people they encounter will have vulnerabilities in one or more domains of communication, unless there is specific evidence to contradict this. Such difficulties may be related to a wider diagnosis (such as an Autism Spectrum Condition, Learning Disability or Learning Difficulty), may arise from environmental factors or may relate to a specific SLCN diagnosis. There are frequently multiple causative and predictive factors at play, with the relationships with anxiety led behaviours, resilience, vulnerability, protective factors. The common connecting element is communication and its characteristics.

In this context, it is recommended that the following be taken into account when interacting with minors:

38 Author's own work based on Leinonen et al., 2023, p. 351.

39 See more details: Dockrell et al., 2017, p. 14.

1. Find out what the child/young person's communication strengths and preferences are
2. Use simple language
3. Use short chunks of language
4. Speak very slightly more slowly than you would normally do
5. Ask the child/young person to repeat back in their own words what you have said
6. Give pointers for what they should listen to
7. Give an overview first
8. Give extra time for the child/young person to listen and process
9. Use visual aids to support understanding
10. Give reminders of appointments
11. Give a variety of tasks
12. Give positive messages
13. Give positive feedback
14. Ask what would help
15. Say when *you* have not understood what has been said
16. Make written materials simple and clear

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