Kevin and Perry Grow Up
A Functional Conversation Skills Programme for Teens
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Context
Approximately 6% of all children are reported to have a primary speech and language impairment (1). Information from several cohort studies suggests that LCN are a lifelong difficulty (2) (3). Although explicit information about the precise numbers of affected adolescents is not known, when language and communication needs (LCN) associated with other complications (e.g. autistic spectrum conditions (ASC); learning difficulties, behaviour) are included, it is thought that the prevalence of persistent LCN could be even higher.

There is evidence to link persistent LCN in adolescence with a number of associated problems:
1. Limited social relationships
2. Poor academic success (4)
3. Lower levels of employment
4. Lack of involvement in leisure activities
5. Higher chances of mental health difficulties
6. Persistent LCN have also been found to have a high incidence amongst offender populations (5) (6)

Young people face many difficulties as they move towards adulthood and independent living; around a consistent level of 10% of 16-18 year olds are classed as NEET (not in education, employment or training) (7): teenagers leaving education with communication disabilities are likely to find it even harder to obtain employment or develop social and romantic relationships.

Aims
Clinical experience suggests that language difficulties may become more resistant to traditional intervention as children grow older, where optimum change has been reached, speech and language therapists (SLTs) would typically begin to consider discharge from services. In view of the associated issues, however, this did not seem to be the most ethical option for this group. It was hypothesized that by increasing awareness of their strengths and needs in communication, and their knowledge of how to use their existing skills in context, young people could start to become more skilled in meeting the communication challenges of adult life.

Methodology
In devising an appropriate treatment package, there were 3 questions we considered:

1. How can we motivate a potentially unmotivated group?
2. How can you people with LCN independently and increase reliance on others?
3. How can young people be supported in learning appropriate social skills for ASC populations?

How can you people with LCN independently and increase reliance on others?

• Video is a highly effective treatment in teaching appropriate social skills for ASC populations (8)
• Video modelling procedures promote skill acquisition and maintenance over time and there is some evidence of generalisation (9)
• More modern technology such as video may be more motivating for teenagers, particularly where they were allowed to take a more active role in setting targets and in using the medium themselves

Video was measured by a comparison of pre- and post-therapy videos of conversations using an informal observation schedule.

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Results
At the end of therapy, comparison of pre and post therapy measures suggests positive changes in conversation skills (fig 1): Peer feedback became more specific over time and there was an increase in self-commenting: these changes suggest increased awareness of conversation skills in themselves and others. Parents reported that they noticed a difference in communication skills outside therapy sessions.

Conclusions and Next Steps
It is felt that the combination of video and peer feedback does have potential benefits in supporting adolescents with LCN to develop functional conversation skills and in moving towards self-managed care. However, further study is needed and should include:

• Larger numbers of participants
• More formalised assessment measures
• Follow-up assessment to determine whether improvements are maintained and generalised

References
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