The Role of Positive Friendships and Family Relationships in the Mental Health and Educational Outcomes of Children with Developmental Language Disorder

A) RATIONALE FOR THE PROJECT

Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) is characterised by difficulties in the ability to use and learn spoken language (Conti-Ramsden, St Clair, Pickles, & Durkin, 2012). Affected children have problems putting words together to formulate sentences (expressive language) and/or understanding the words that are being said (receptive language). The prevalence of DLD is ~7% (Norbury et al., 2016).

In the general population, social support from family and friends mediates the relationship between childhood adversity and subsequent depressive symptoms (van Harmelen et al., 2016). Children with DLD have poorer quality friendships compared to their unaffected peers (Durkin & Conti-Ramsden, 2007). What is less clear is the extent to which the valence of these friendships and family relationships contributes to mental health and educational difficulties in children with DLD. Most of the previous work on this topic has focussed on the negative aspects of friendships, such as peer problems (Mok, Pickles, Durkin, & Conti-Ramsden, 2014). Much less attention has been focussed on the positive aspects of friendships and family relationships, such as closeness, common interest, mutual psychological support, empathy, and prosociality. An investigation into these positive constructs will allow for the identification of the strengths and weaknesses in children with DLD. If, as predicted, positive friendships and family relationships are associated with better mental health and educational outcomes, and these are identified as areas of weakness for children with DLD, then this will advance our understanding of the antecedents of mental health and educational difficulties in children with DLD.

B) REFERENCES THAT SHOULD BE READ (if you do not have access to these, please email me)


C) RESEARCH AIMS / QUESTIONS

1. How do children with DLD compare to those without DLD on positive friendships and family relationships?
2. How are these effects (1) different for children in primary and secondary school?
3. To what extent are positive friendships and family relationships associated with better mental health and educational outcomes in children with DLD?
4. How are these effects (3) different for children with and without DLD?

D) METHODS
Children with DLD and their parents (and those without as controls) will be recruited from schools and local support services. Parents and children will be asked to complete questionnaires and/or take part in structured assessments about positive friendships and family relationships, mental health, language and communication difficulties, and sociodemographic information. Data about educational outcomes will be obtained from school records. The data will be analysed using quantitative analysis within a structural equation modelling framework (training in advanced statistical modelling will be provided).