

Using Language That Youth Can Understand THE WASHINGTON JUDICIAL COLLOQUIES

Webinar Q & A with Rosa Peralta

On November 7, 2012, NJJN held a webinar entitled, “Using Language in Court That Youth Can Understand: the Washington Judicial Colloquies.” The webinar discussed a new guide from Models for Change, called the "[Washington Judicial Colloquies Project: a Guide for Improving Communication and Understanding in Court.](#)" The document provides guidance on how to consistently use developmentally-appropriate language in court that youth can understand.

TeamChild, NJJN's member in Washington State, led the development of the guide as part of its participation with the Juvenile Indigent Defense Action Network (JIDAN). In this document, Rosa Peralta, the research associate at TeamChild in Seattle, WA, answers some key questions from webinar attendees.

Q: As a case manager for youth in the juvenile justice system, how would I be able to help my clients to better understand language before their attorney "makes a plea deal" and help them to better understand the consequences of the court's decision?

A: When meeting with a youth I suggest that, as a general practice, you assume that she/he does not understand. Ask them to explain to you in their own words why they are there and what will happen if they take the plea. I also suggest that you develop a cheat sheet that simplifies the language often found in the exceptionally confusing plea forms. You can give this sheet to the youth to go over the plea agreement with her/his attorney. It is the attorney's responsibility to ensure that the youth understands exactly what it is that he/she is facing and the consequences of the decisions they make. Zealous advocacy does not mean that you will only fight like a bulldog during the court hearing(s) but that you will do everything in your power to provide the best advice and representation to the youth that you are working with throughout the entire process.

Q: Can you show how to get to the readability score in Word again?

A: When Microsoft Office Word finishes checking the spelling and grammar, you can choose to display information about the reading level of the document, including readability scores according to the following tests: Flesch Reading Ease and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level. Here is how to Test your document's readability:

- Click the Microsoft Office Button, and then click “Word Options”.
- Click “Proofing.”
- Make sure “Check grammar with spelling” is selected.
- Under “When correcting grammar in Word,” select the “Show readability statistics” check box.

Q: Were the youth in the study chosen because they were diagnosed with a specific language impairment, or was the sample random?

A: It was a random sample. We interviewed a total of 60 youth (30 in each county). The youth were asked to participate as they walked out of the courtroom. They were given a \$5 gift certificate for answering the researcher’s questions. We focused on youth that were present in the court for either the first appearance hearing or had been adjudicated and given probation.

Q: Are these simpler forms and ways of speaking going to be used in adult court rooms as well?

A: We currently do not have colloquies for adults. We will be presenting the project at our annual judicial conference to judges in both juvenile and adult courts. We hope that the judges in both courts will be interested in implementing the colloquies. Given the high incidents of illiteracy and learning disabilities among those involved in the criminal justice system, I believe that it is imperative that we also change the way that courts communicate with adult defendants.

Q: How many other locals around the country have adopted this program?

A: The toolkit and the findings were published this month. We've presented the study at various conferences and have people from approximately 10 states interested or working on implementing the colloquies project in their jurisdiction.