



Exploitation and Language: Words Matter

22/04/22 Developed by Jackie Barstow and Jeannette Chipping

The information in this document has been developed from a range of sources including:

- ✓ Appiah, A., Baguley, S., SPACE, & Farooq, R. (2021). [Making Words Matter. Attending to Language when working with children subject to or at risk of Exploitation: A Practice and Knowledge Briefing](#). NWG Network, Derby, UK.
- ✓ The Children's Society Guidance (2022) '[Appropriate Language in Relation to Child Exploitation](#)'
- ✓ 'Languaging Child and Adolescent Vulnerability': A Guide For Professionals, Practitioners and Partner Agencies supporting children and families in community settings. Simone Nyarko (2018) Hackney Contextual Safeguarding Project. [Practice guides \(csnetwork.org.uk\)](#)

The aim of this resource is to raise awareness about why words matter and the importance of our use of language when working with children/young people/adults at risk who are subject to or at risk of exploitation. The content relates to children, but the information/resources will also be applicable to those transitioning into adulthood and adults at risk.

What does this mean?

This brief highlights the need for professionals to consider the words, phrases, discourses and jargon used when speaking to and speaking about victims of exploitation. This refers to language used verbally and written in files, referrals, assessments and reports.

Any language suggesting a child/young person is responsible for their abuse and/or crime they are subjected to must be avoided. A failure to do so may mean that the child/ren are not safeguarded appropriately.

Children cannot consent to their own exploitation.

It is acknowledged that our language is shaped by and normalized within the cultures we work, live and spend time. Language is always changing and evolving, some previously acceptable terms may no longer be appropriate. Professionals should have an open and reflect mindset to be able to adapt to these changes. Rarely do individuals intend to use victim blaming language but may do so unconsciously.

Why do Words Matter?

Language is Powerful

- The way we use language influences our thinking. Recent serious case reviews in other areas have highlighted this as a significant issue which contributed to systemic failure to protect.
- Any language implying that a child/young person or group of young people are complicit in or responsible for the harm they experience, negatively influences the lens by which we assess their needs and offer support.
- In the past some labels which have been used to describe children and their behaviour has led to inaccurate assumptions which in turn minimise the risks and reality of the child's situation. [See slide The Importance of a Shared Language.](#)
- The use of inappropriate language may judge the child and imply they could have acted differently or they are to blame.
- Victim blaming language may reinforce messages from perpetrators around shame and guilt. This in turn may prevent the person from disclosing their abuse as they may feel fear of being blamed by professionals.

Remember: this is a form of abuse; it is not a lifestyle choice.

- If we talk about a child using inappropriate language what they and other professionals may hear is that they are in some way responsible for what is happening to them and therefore less deserving of our support.
- Consider also the impact on parents and carers.

The Role of Language and The Process of Dehumanisation

- Theory exploring dehumanisation sets its foundation in the use of dehumanising language.
- The process of seeing an individual as less than human is initiated through the narratives developed about them (Luna, 2015).
- These narratives retold become the norm of what we hear about these groups and become parameters to justify how an individual is to be judged (Tran et al., 2018).
- Dehumanisation serves the function of inhibiting our moral compass whereby we are able to sit comfortably with judgements and actions which we otherwise would not reach if the whole person was seen (Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta & DiTomasso, 2014).
- The process of dehumanising is slow and insidious and a process that begins usually through the use of short-hand terms, labels and discourses when communicating about children and young people.
- Below are some examples of language that we should consider alternatives for. This is not an exhaustive list - refer to the [SSP Using appropriate language for those subject to or at risk of exploitation](#) for further guidance.

Term	What it can imply
Refusal to Engage or Hard to Reach	Does not recognise perpetrator influence or how accessible services are for the young person. Does not consider what processes may limit opportunities a young person has to engage with services or how safe do they feel to enter into 'unknown territory'.
Knife crime	Negates the potential seriousness of other forms of violence. Is this categorically more dangerous than a blunt object used to cause harm? Also does not consider the context which fosters a need to carry a weapon.
Putting themselves at risk	Implies the child is free and able to make informed decisions and is responsible for risks instigated by the perpetrator or the contexts in which they live.
Plugging	Dismisses the context of sexual violence, coercion, humiliation and exploitation the child has had to endure in the process of this act being committed.

Source: Appiah, A., Baguley, S., SPACE, & Farooq, R. (2021). [Making Words Matter. Attending to Language when working with children subject to or at risk of Exploitation: A Practice and Knowledge Briefing](#). NWG Network, Derby, UK.

What Should Professionals Do?

When referring to people who have been, or are at risk of being exploited, the language we use should reflect the presence of coercion and the lack of control people have in abusive or exploitative situations.

We must recognise the severity of the impact exploitation has on the individual.

Professionals should avoid using inappropriate terms in their recordings/conversations and should be mindful of when they enter their thinking and challenge them.

When in meetings or discussions respectfully challenge any inappropriate language, labelling and terminology about children.

Familiarise yourself with [SSP Using appropriate language for those subject to or at risk of exploitation](#). This includes examples of poorly worded responses and some suggested alternatives. See also the further information and resources at the end of this document.

How Can We Do It?

For trust to develop and ensure that children feel supported to disclose their experiences, they need to be listened to and their experiences accepted and recorded.

This is complex but below are some tips which may help you.

- ✓ Ensure the voice of the child/adult is evident in all recordings.
- ✓ Use strengths based language and avoid language that places the problem on the person (see [SSP Using appropriate language for those subject to or at risk of exploitation](#)).
- ✓ Be Trauma Informed.
- ✓ Consider your own values and attitudes.
- ✓ Regularly review and reflect on what you have written/said. If victim blaming/inappropriate language has been used historically ensure that this is not duplicated.
- ✓ Remind yourself of the influential role you have in shaping the support and experiences of people who may be at risk of exploitation.
- ✓ Be confident to question victim blaming language and challenge each other respectfully.
- ✓ No jargon.
- ✓ Don't sanitise it – if it is rape record it as rape.
- ✓ Remember children/parents/carers can access their records or they be may used in legal proceedings.
- ✓ Reflective Practice and regular supervision can support us to keep the conversation about language 'alive'.

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How Can We Do It Continued?

When working with children/young people:

Listen to and engage with the language and terminology they use while sharing alternatives. Doing so may form part of work to help them understand exploitation and healthy relationships where this is needed and at its best, may help the young person to reframe their experiences and recognise that what happened to them wasn't their fault.

This will be very dependent on the relationship between each professional and young person and sometimes doing this may harm the relationship.

It is important for professionals to consider how different terms might feel for a young person to hear when used to describe them, including being labelled as a victim of exploitation, trafficking, or [modern slavery](#) (*see next slide for further information on the use of this term*). While such terms are useful for discussions between professionals, they may feel disempowering for young people themselves.

Ultimately only you as a professional can understand this dynamic and can work with the young person to identify terms you are both comfortable with using.

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Source: Information taken from The Children's Society Guidance (2022, pages 3-4) '[Appropriate Language in Relation to Child Exploitation](#)'. Please refer to the original document for the full information.

How Can We Do It Continued?

When working with children/young people:

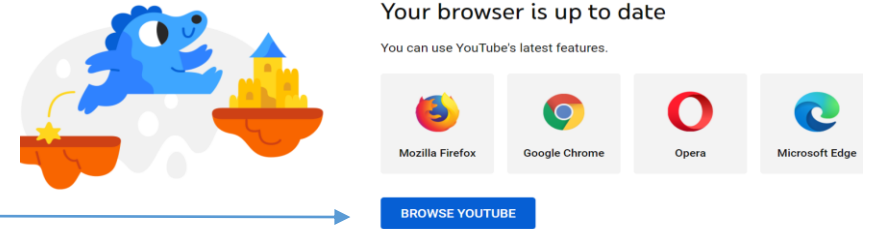
Use of the term Modern Slavery.

- ✓ The term modern slavery set out in the Modern Slavery Act 2015 describes organised criminal activity including sexual and criminal exploitation, forced labour and domestic servitude.
- ✓ it is important to consider the wider context and history of the term 'slavery' and the connotations it may have for different people including young people themselves.
- ✓ There are some concerns that the term modern slavery may trivialise or relativise such historic slavery.
- ✓ Modern perpetrators including Organised Crime Groups also use tactics of control and coercion that echo those used historically including violence, abuse, holding people in captivity, and the targeting of marginalised groups with false promises of material and social gain.
- ✓ When considering the use of this term in conversations with young people, consider how it might feel to be described as a 'slave', what it might mean for them, and consider alternatives.
- ✓ Where it is likely that a child may hear or read the term being used to describe them, we recommend making space to explore the term with them, and why professionals may use it.
- ✓ Ensure there is time and space for the young person to talk about how the term impacts them if they want to and come to an agreement on the language that is used between you.
- ✓ Where relevant, then advocate for a change in language from other professionals who may use the term in conversation with the young person.

Source: Information taken from The Children's Society Guidance (2022, pages 3-4) '[Appropriate Language in Relation to Child Exploitation](#)'.
Please refer to the original document for the full information.

The impact of language

If you click on the hyperlink to view the video clip and you see this screen – click on the blue box 'Browse YouTube'. It should take you directly to the relevant video clip.



Watch these short clips to better understand the impact that language can have on the individual.



Source: Waltham Forest Council - Victim Blaming Language

Clip lasts 1:46.

Link - [Victim blaming language - YouTube](#)



Language in Social Work but also relevant to other professionals.

Source: [YouTube](#).

Clip lasts 4:47.



Learning from Case Reviews and Audits

The Importance of a Shared Language

Jacob

Circumstances leading to the review:

- Jacob, a 16-year-old boy was found dead in his bedroom.
- The Coroner's Report recorded Jacob was intoxicated and distressed, with insufficient evidence that he had intended to end his life.
- The Review analyses how Jacob was groomed into a world where he was criminally exploited and exposed to serious levels of youth violence.
- Jacob's behaviours at times were seen as being too dangerous to include him and this resulted in him being excluded from sources of help.
- Conversely at other times the levels of risk to Jacob and his vulnerability to being seriously harmed was not seen in the significant way that they should have been despite have various evidential information, professional opinion and incidences of harm.

Excerpt from [Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board Child Safeguarding Practice Review: Jacob](#).

(Published 19th January 2021, p.34 section 8.4 refers)

Jacob - Key Learning:

- ❖ *“The language we use can impact on how we view children and their families and how we form our professional judgements and this may result in how risk is seen and support is given. It is important as it can also alter how realistic the picture is of a child.”*
- ❖ *“...the use of emotive language has been considered in terms of how it influenced how Jacob was seen by key professionals to analyse whether at times it resulted in an outcome whereby the “tail wagged the dog”... in certain settings at certain times the behaviour that Jacob was showing or was alleged to have shown took precedent over his other needs and were based on single pieces of evidence or assumption.”*
- ❖ *“Jacob’s behaviours were at times referred to in highly emotive ways by professionals who had more often than not simply read about Jacob in reports, had never met him and the risk was then escalated to a point where professionals felt he was too unmanageable to be in their provision and posed a risk to others.”*
- ❖ *“When working to understand a child’s world it is important to be aware of unconscious bias and the use of overly emotive language as this can affect how risk is seen by the partnership and to look beyond behaviours to understand needs.”*

Adultification

- Happens when preconceptions held about children, lead to them being treated and perceived as being more 'adult-like' (Goff et al, 2014, Davis, J. and Marsh, N., 2020).
- If children are 'seen' as more adult-like, further assumptions may be made about a child, including the perception that they have more agency, autonomy, and choice, than they actually do. It is likely that these perceptions of children will transfer into the language used to describe them, affecting the ways in which they are supported and safeguarded by professionals.
- This disproportionately affects black boys as evidenced in a number of serious case reviews in recent years. It stems from bias and prejudice which perpetuates negative stereotypes and racism and can lead to significant safeguarding failures.
- This is reflective of other forms of discrimination and it is important for professionals to be aware of all biases and areas of systemic oppression which impact children's lives. These can be present in any workforce and organisations should ensure an intersectional and anti-oppressive approach is taken when working with and safeguarding children.
- This is discussed in the context of safeguarding black boys from exploitation in this [article](#) by Jahnine Davis and Nick Marsh and in the VKPP Spotlight Briefing: [Child Criminal Exploitation | Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme \(vkpp.org.uk\)](#).
- Adultification bias was one of the findings highlighted in the City of London & Hackney Safeguarding Children Partnership Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review published in March 2022. In 2020, Child Q, a Black female child of secondary school age, was stripped and searched by female police officers from the Metropolitan Police Service. [Click here to access the report](#)

Learning from Audits

The use of language when working with children who are at risk or subjected to child exploitation to ensure they are not blamed was identified in a SSP Multi-Agency Audit (August 2021).

As evidenced in this document by using consistent and appropriate language this shows children that we recognise and understand their situation and we are not blaming or judging them. This can help improve our relationships with them.





Multi-Agency Responsibility

Research evidence from academics, practitioners and Experts by Experience recognise that attending to language requires a whole system approach across all agencies. It further recognises the pivotal role that practitioners and services play in shaping the identity of many younger victims.

Professionals are asked to consider the messages in this brief, together with the suggested appropriate language in the [SSP using appropriate language document](#) when speaking to and speaking about those who are at risk of or victims of exploitation. This refers to language used verbally and written in files, referrals, assessments and reports.

Further Information/Guidance

- ✓ SSP [Using appropriate language for those subject to or at risk of exploitation - Swindon Safeguarding Partnership](#)
- ✓ [SSP Child Exploitation webpage](#)
- ✓ [SSP Risk Outside The Home webpage](#)
- ✓ The Children's Society [Child Exploitation Language Guide | The Children's Society \(childrenssociety.org.uk\)](#)
- ✓ NWG Network: Making words Matter - A Practice & Knowledge Briefing: [Making words matter - A practice knowledge briefing - Swindon Safeguarding](#)
- ✓ NWG Webinar recording of the launch of the Making Words Matter Briefing [Making Words Matter - recording – YouTube](#) (clips lasts 1.55 minutes)
- ✓ 'Languaging Child and Adolescent Vulnerability': A Guide For Professionals, Practitioners and Partner Agencies supporting children and families in community settings. Simone Nyarko (2018) Hackney Contextual Safeguarding Project. [Practice guides \(csnetwork.org.uk\)](#)
- ✓ Parents against child exploitation (Pace): [Parents Against Child Exploitation \(Pace\) UK \(paceuk.info\)](#)
- ✓ Space: [SPACE | Stop & Prevent Adolescent Criminal Exploitation | Countylines \(bespaceaware.co.uk\)](#)