



Attending to language when working with those subject to or at risk of exploitation.

**MAKING
WORDS
MATTER**

Housekeeping



Recording



Cameras and
microphones off



Please ask
questions

Aims of session

- Explore the importance that language has in shaping a child's identity within society.
- Explore why attending to language is important when working with children/young people/adults at risk subject to or at risk of exploitation.
- Consider the key points which should be considered to effectively attend to language.
- Explore the challenges related to attending to language and how agencies/organisations may effectively support professionals to do this.

What is meant by attending to language?

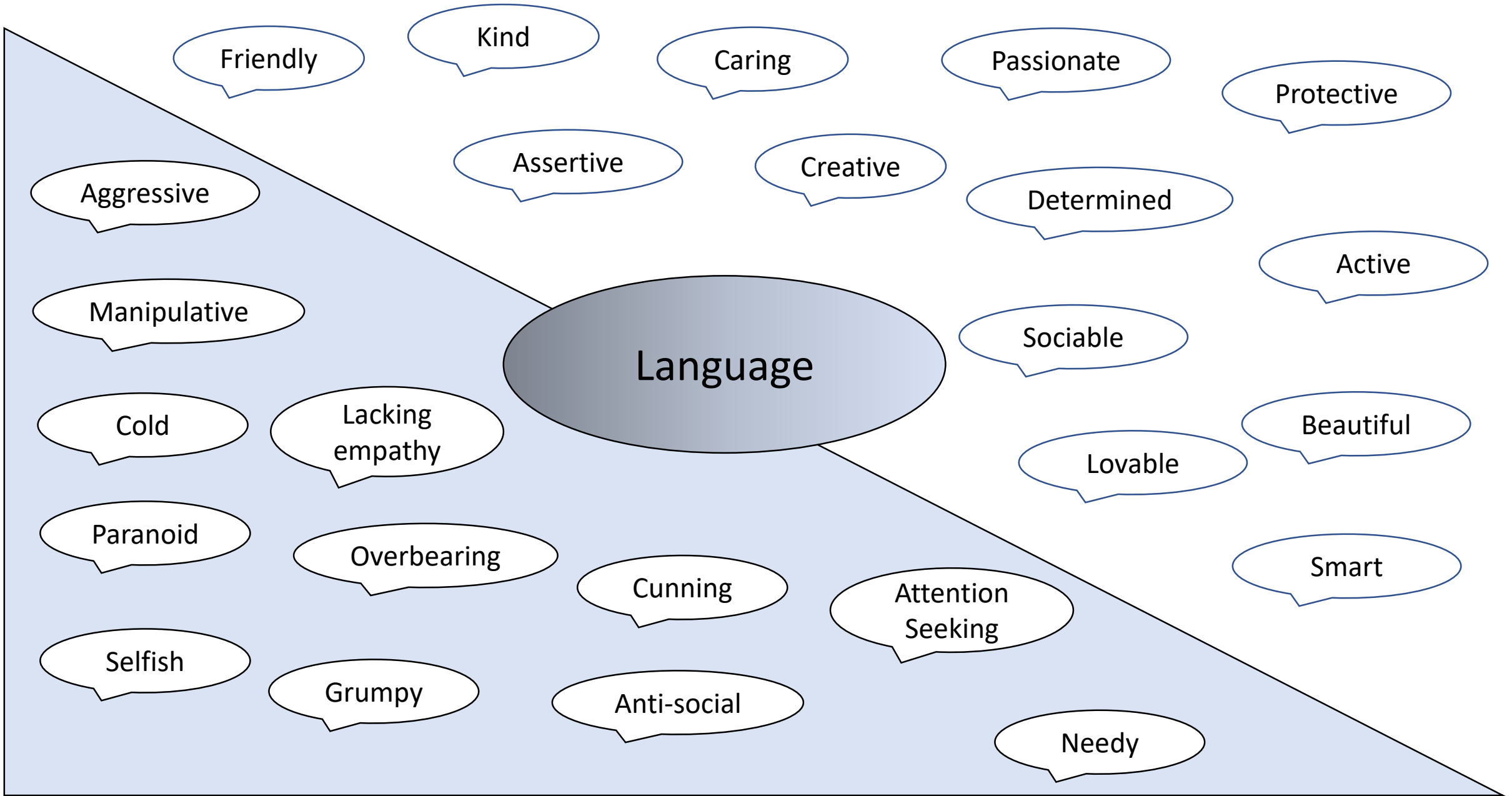
- Need for professionals to consider the words, phrases, discourses and jargon used when speaking to/about children/young people and adults.
- Emphasis on the impact of language used and the implications it has on providing effective support to children/young people/adults subject to exploitation.
- Language used verbally and written in files, referrals, assessments and reports.

Why is language important?

Why is language important?



- Used to connect, to understand and to communicate (Galbin, 2014).
- How identity is formed (Fivush, Habermas, Waters & Zaman, 2011).
- The way children are described, spoken about and represented is important in developing a sense of self and an understanding of their behaviour within society (McAdams, 2011).
- ‘problem saturated’ narratives have an immense impact on the sense of self of children and evidence that they internalise these. (Looyeh, Kamali & Shafieian, 2012).
- As children develop, they take on board the narratives held of them by others which in turn forms the basis of how they go on to describe themselves (McLean & Syed, 2015).
- Important that language used to speak about and represent children/adults is attended to, evaluated, critically reflected on and deconstructed.
- Can impact on the professional response/unconscious bias.
- Victim blaming



Friendly

Kind

Caring

Passionate

Protective

Assertive

Creative

Determined

Active

Aggressive

Manipulative

Sociable

Beautiful

Cold

Lacking empathy

Lovable

Smart

Paranoid

Overbearing

Cunning

Attention Seeking

Selfish

Grumpy

Anti-social

Needy

Language

Language, identity and child exploitation

- **Language used - often sets the tone for how YP are judged/understood. E.g., using terms which do not make explicit the context of coercion/exploitation/control can reinforce guilt & shame and ‘the perpetrators voice’** (Beckett, 2011).
- Terms which fail to recognize the limited opportunities for effective self-agency held by children/YP limit how they can be understood.
- **Narratives developed by practitioners been evidenced to skew decision making which can perpetuate deserving/undeserving discourses which in turn influences which opportunities are afforded to children/YP.** (Sims-Schouten, Skinner & Rivett, 2019).
- **Risk - disclosures are not made - out of fear of being blamed/seen as at fault. Language used to describe their experiences draws attention away from perpetrator responsibility and devalues the vulnerability of this population** (McAlinden, 2014).
- **Language which lacks the full context of the YP’s experience promotes failure in seeing the whole YP and a failure to support each area of need they present with.**
- Contradictions in language around exploited children is evident e.g., high risk and highly vulnerable and at the same time need to take responsibility for their actions (Daniel, 2010; Bradt & Bouverne- De Bie, 2009).

Language, identity and child exploitation continued

- Evidences bias by which a sequence of further marginalisation can occur – need to consider the implication of blanket assumptions of ‘vulnerability’. E.g. young people contesting their ‘vulnerable’ label as this enforced narratives of them being incapable of caring for themselves (Stephen, 2002; Harris, 2004; Ellis, 2016) despite speaking of experiences which contradicted this.
- Young people can become frustrated when excluded from decision- making processes and the right to make life choices (Ellis, 2018).
- Concepts of vulnerability and victimhood are complex, contested and problematic (Ellis, 2018).
- **Simple definition/understanding of vulnerability/victimhood not only assumes what a ‘vulnerable victim’ looks like but also inadvertently becomes a parameter by which young people who do not fit that image can be excluded** (Pheonix, 2012).
- **Rarely fit the image of a ‘perfect victim’ & in most cases will resist being ‘rescued’ by services/practitioner & may be viewed as having made a ‘choice’ to engage in exploitative behaviours** (Shaw & Greenhow, 2020).

Important that practitioners expand their perspective of vulnerability and victimhood to understand ways in which young people have made attempts to meet their own needs.

Language, identity and power relations

Development of child/young people's identity and self-definition is shaped by experiences with others and how the child is perceived by others (Norton, 2016).

Language is therefore inseparable from social meanings that are developed in communities and shaped by inequalities embedded in these communities.

Labels/terms used to describe young people form ideas and blueprints of how they are to be seen and judged or in effect which lens is chosen to scrutinise the young person's past/present behaviour.

Language currently used by health and social care services to speak about and represent children/young people could be defined as 'adultist' (Bell, 1995). This describes the use of terms, phrases and behaviours which benefit the adult over the child.

Includes using language which is difficult for the child to understand and diminishes their right to have an opinion (Bertrand, Brooks & Dominquez, 2020).

Practitioners maintain power and control of decision-making processes through the linguistics which favour the adult understanding of the young person's experience (Gabriel, Brown, Leon & Outley, 2020).

Language used by practitioners about young people which does not embody the young person's narrative is at risk of increasing power imbalances and marginalisation of young people already experiencing disempowerment (Young, 2013).

Equality, diversity and inclusion

Risk of harm significantly increases when a young person is subject to intersecting forms of discrimination, such as race and systemic racism (Barn, 2010; Bernard, 2018).

Over the last decade, several reports indicate children/young people from Black, Asian and other minoritized groups in the UK are disproportionately represented within the criminal justice system (Lammy, 2017; Taylor, 2016).

It is evidenced that prejudice, stereotypes and language intersect in how a child or young person from a disadvantaged background is understood.

Resulting in young people being scrutinised as an adult despite having many contraindicating factors to this perspective.

Gender stereotypes

Need for critical appraisal/reflection on the language used to speak about children/adults from minoritized backgrounds in order to ensure inclusive care and services are delivered.



Psychological dehumanisation

‘Less than human’

Denial of full humanness to others, and the cruelty and suffering that accompanies it. (Haslam, 2006)

Categorisation, objectification, imagery, and metaphor

Avoiding negative affect – disgust, fear, shock

The role of psychological distance (Opatow, 1990)

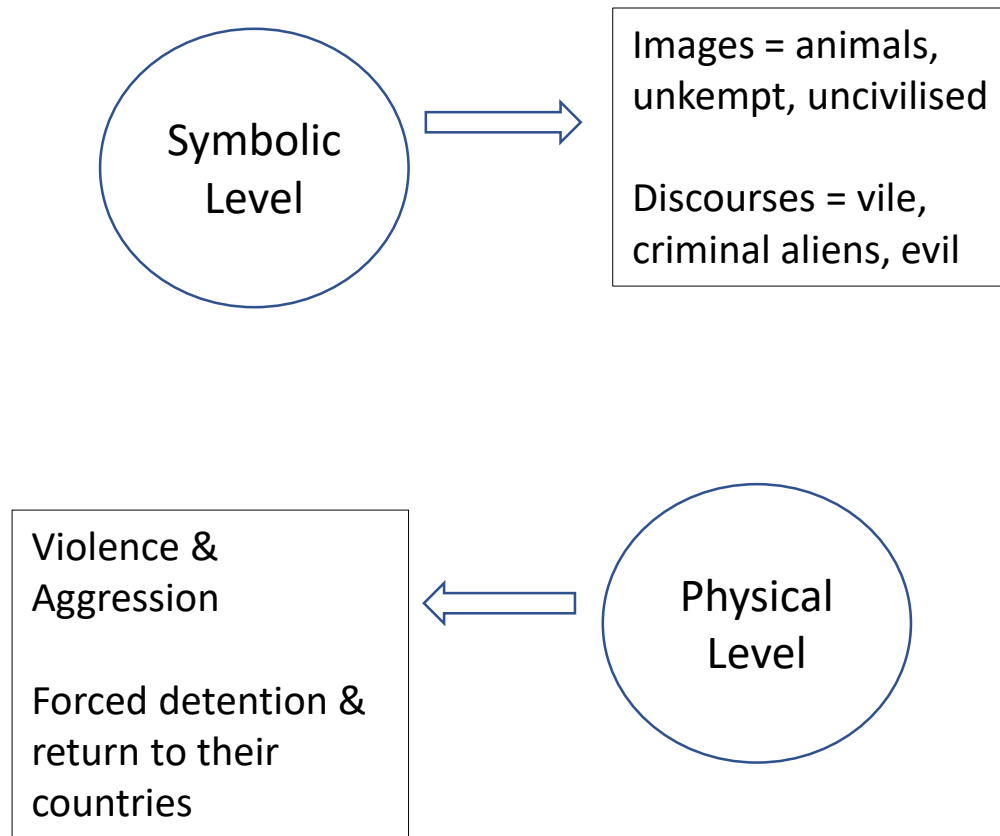
It invalidates children and their families

Leads to self-dehumanisation

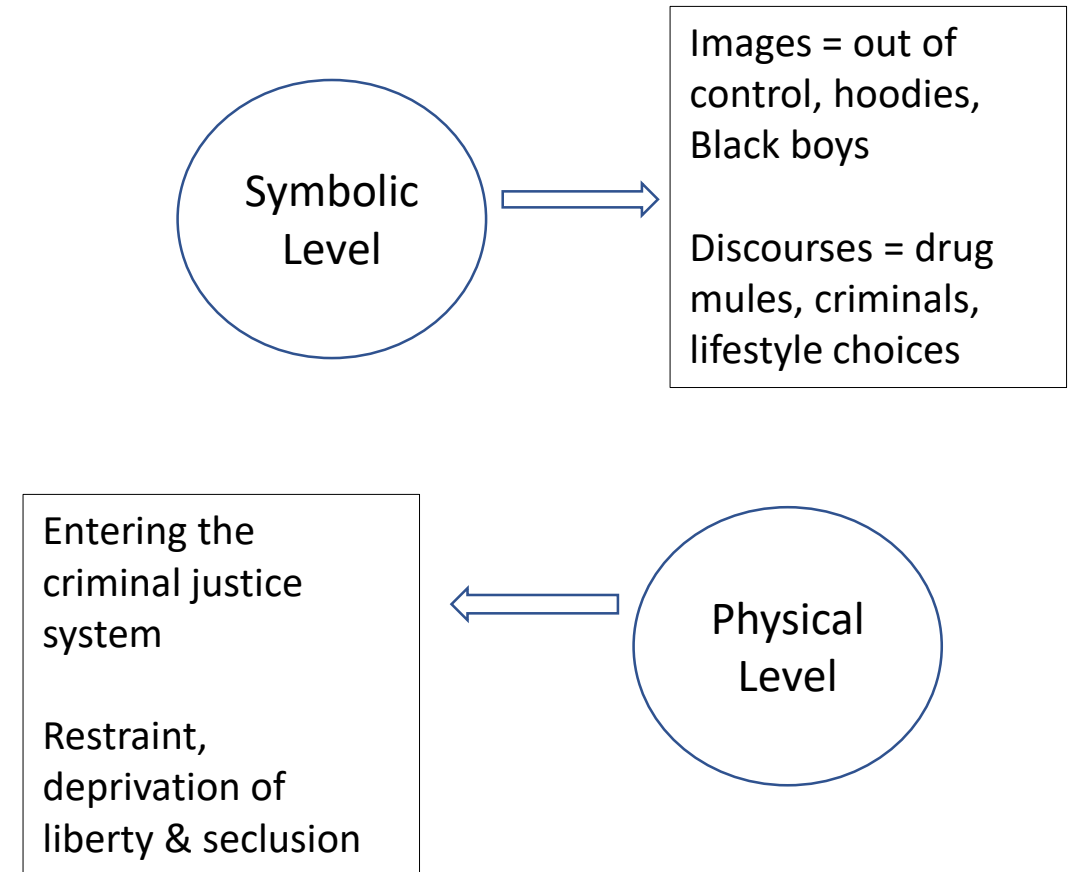
Dehumanisation at work – 2 stages

US Presidential Election

Warnock and McCann (2019)



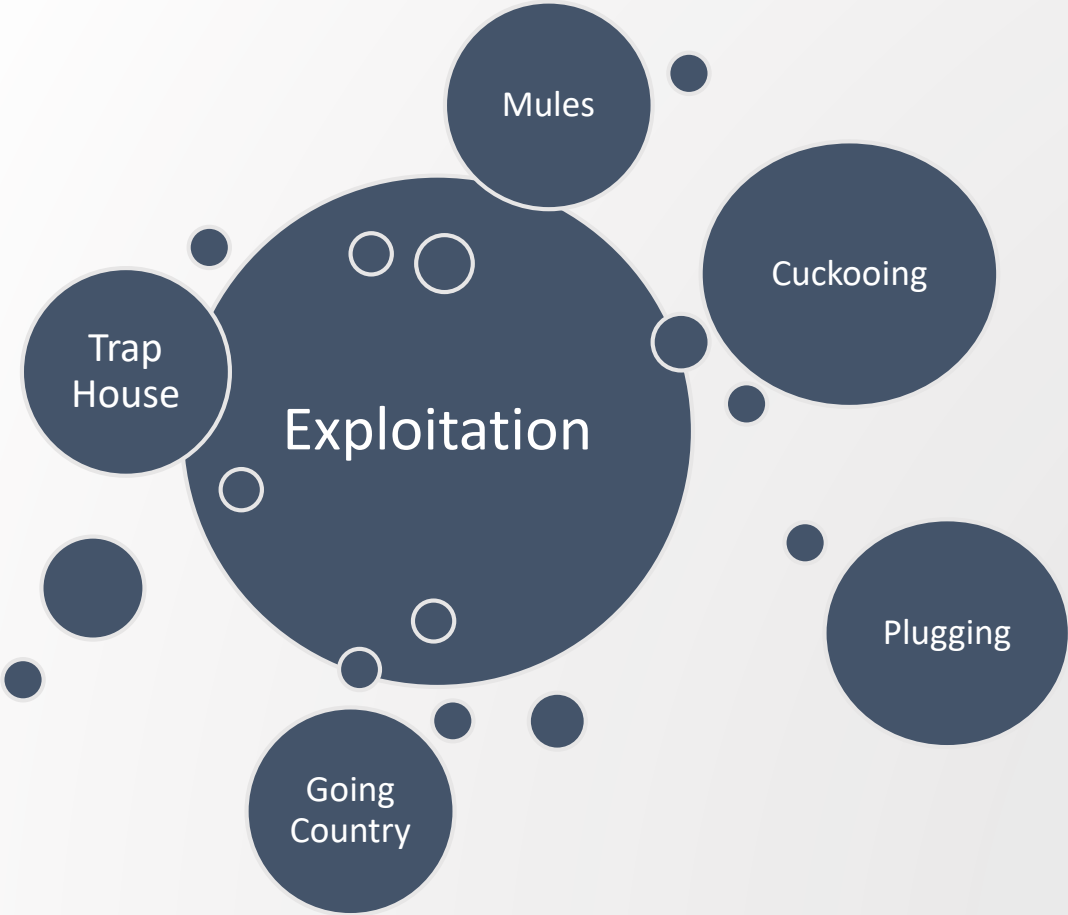
Child Exploitation



Consequences of dehumanisation

- Deprived of rights and privileges
- **Further marginalization & disenfranchisement**
- **Increases violence and aggression** (Rai et al., 2017)
- **More likely to go down the criminal justice route**
- Less compassion in CJS and services
- **Legitimizes use of force and harsher sentencing**
- **Reduced empathy & understanding**
- **Drives disconnection** (Brown, 2016)
- Moral exclusion – starts with language, often followed by images.
- Invalidates child and their family – treated with severity not empathy
- **Self fulfilling prophecy**

Terms used in exploitation



Example

Information contained on a report concerning a 17-year old Ali female who lives in semi-independent accommodation.

“Staff at her placement have become increasingly concerned at the number of male visitors to the home. She is demonstrating over sexualised and promiscuous behaviour, and staff there believe she may be putting herself at risk by prostituting herself. She comes home smelling of cannabis and they are concerned that she may be offering sex for drugs or money to buy drugs”. Staff are concerned she is recruiting and exploiting other residents.

What are your initial thoughts on reading this?

What if Ali is 26 years old?

The reality....

She has been forced through threats and violence to carry drugs and firearms for a gang.

She has also been forced to have sex with the gang members – she has been repeatedly raped.

She uses cannabis/other drugs as a way of coping.

She has been coerced to 'recruit' new children and adults not known to the police/other agencies.

Uncooperative Challenging behaviour Competent Resilient
Drug dealing Parents don't attend meetings Difficult
Sexually active since age... Streetwise Keeps being exploited

Our Language

Not engaging/failed to engage They know the risk What goes comes around goes around
Won't leave In a relationship with...
Hard to reach Poor attitude
Boyfriend/girlfriend Puts themselves at risk
Involved in CSE/CCE/County Lines
Parents colluding Knows what he/she are doing
Despite the risk he/she continues to...
Criminal/perpetrator Sexually active with...

Some terms used and the implication

Term	What it can imply
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
Going country	Implies a voluntary action and diminishes the multifaceted coercion, grooming and exploitation that occurs
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
Prostitution	Implies the child has capacity to make a free and informed choice and negates exploitation or coercion into sexual acts
Promiscuous	Implies an invitation to consensual sexual activity and elicits a stereotypical judgement which is victim blaming for non-consensual sexual contact.
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.
Cuckooing	Does not consider the multifaceted nature of exploitation and that a home either theirs or others is being used to facilitate further forms of exploitation

Term	What it can imply
Drug dealer	Hides the coercion and exploitation the child is subjected to. Implies autonomy in actions and consent to engage in criminal activity fully informed of potential repercussions and free from coercion
LAC kid	Not using the child's name creates emotional distance with the child and hides their individual experiences. How may this term be experienced by children when used by professional carers attempting to engage them therapeutically?
Gang member	Hides the coercion and exploitation the child is subjected to. Implies autonomy in actions and consent to engage in criminal activity fully informed of potential repercussions and free from coercion
Drug or Money Mule	This implies that the young person has the capacity to make a free and fully informed choice. It also does not recognise the exploitative context the young person is being influenced by.
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'.
The child is in communication with unknown adults online	Can imply that the child is proactive in seeking out adults online rather than attending to the motivations of adults in engaging in these communications with vulnerable children.

The impact on individuals



Source: [Waltham Forest Council](#)

The impact on parents/carers

- Implications extends to family/carers.
- Experiences shared by parents/carers emphasises they can feel wholly responsible for exploitative circumstances their child has been subjected to particularly when the harm was extra-familial. (Thomas & D'Arcy, 2017)
- Discourses with parents/carers which do not make clear the true extent of their child's experiences negatively impacts their ability to contest narratives which do not support the needs of their child.

“No parent can control an exploited child under the control of an Organised Crime Gang. Exploited children are equally beyond statutory professionals' control but the focus and the language used remains on parents on whom it is wholly unrealistic and unfair to place such a colossal and dangerous expectation” (SPACE) p.10

Recording information – why its matters

- Impacts on professional response
- Can be seen by child/family
- Used in legal proceedings – criminal and civil
- Case review: Jacob

Key Learning Jacob: Importance of a shared language

“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.”

How can we say it differently?



Inappropriate term: Putting themselves at risk

This implies that the child is responsible for the risk presented by the perpetrator and that they are able to make free and informed choices.

Suggested alternatives may be...

- The child may have been groomed.
- The child is at an increased vulnerability of being abused and/or exploited.
- A perpetrator may exploit the child's increased vulnerability.
- The child is not in a protective environment.
- The situation could reduce the child's safety.
- The location is dangerous to children.
- The location/situation could increase a perpetrator's opportunity to abuse them.
- It is unclear whether the child is under duress to go missing.
- There are concerns that the child may be being sexually abused.
- It is unclear why the child is getting into cars.
- There are concerns that there is a power imbalance forcing the child to act in this way.
- There are concerns regarding other influences on the child.

Inappropriate term: Spending time/associating with 'elders'

This implies that the child or young person is responsible for the exploitation and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context

Suggested alternatives may be...

- The young person says that they are friends with a person and there are concerns about that person's age, the imbalance of power, exploitation, offending.
- The young person has been groomed, exploited, controlled.

Note: If the elder is under the age of 18 years old, this will need to be considered in line with child protection processes.

Inappropriate term: Offering him/her drugs seemingly in return for sex or to run drugs.

This implies that the child or young person is responsible for the exploitation and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.

Suggested alternatives may be...

- The child is being sexually/ criminally exploited.
- The child is being criminally exploited through drug debt.
- There are concerns that the child has been raped as they do not have the freedom or capacity to consent. Perpetrators are sexually abusing the child.
- The child is being sexually abused.
- The child's vulnerability regarding drug use is being used by others to abuse them.
- The perpetrators have a hold over the child by the fact that they have a drug dependency

Inappropriate terms

Putting themselves at risk

Involved in risk taking behaviours

This implies that the adult is responsible for the risks presented by the perpetrator(s) and that they are able to make free and informed choices.

Despite the risk s/he continues to return to the location..."

This implies that the adult is responsible for any exploitation they experience in a location. It does not recognise abusive or exploitative context or their right to be in the location without experiencing harm

Suggested alternatives

The adult may have been groomed

"The adult is at an increased vulnerability of being abused and/or exploited"

"A perpetrator may exploit the adult's increased vulnerability"

"The adult is not in a protective environment"

"The situation could reduce the adult's safety"

The location is dangerous to adults"

"The location/situation could increase a perpetrator's opportunity to abuse them"

"It is unclear whether the adult is under duress"

"There are concerns that the adult may be being sexually abused and/or exploited"

There are concerns that there is a power imbalance influencing the adult to act in this way"

"There are concerns regarding other influences on the adult"

There are concerns regarding the adults capacity to make relevant decisions regarding contact"

Inappropriate term

Drug running – He/she is drug running or is recruiting others to deal drugs”

This implies that the adult is responsible for the exploitation and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.

Suggested alternatives

Criminal exploitation (CE)”

“The adult is being criminally exploited”

“There are concerns that the adult is being trafficked for the purpose of criminal exploitation”

Inappropriate term

He/she is choosing this lifestyle or is making a lifestyle choice”

This implies that the adult is responsible for the exploitation and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.

Suggested alternatives

“The adult is being criminally exploited”

“The adult is being sexually exploited”

Inappropriate term

Spending time/associating with individuals of concern

This implies that the adult is responsible for the exploitation and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.

Suggested alternatives

“The adult says that they are friends with a person and there are concerns about that person’s age, the imbalance of power, exploitation and/or offending”

“There are concerns that the adult has been groomed, exploited and/or coerced and controlled”

What can we do to support change

- Complex.
- Challenge each other respectfully.
- Review and reflect on what you have written/said.
- No jargon.
- Don't sanitise it.
- Access to recordings.
- Language is powerful.
- Ensure the voice of the child/adult is evident in all recordings
- Regularly review language used in recordings and if victim blaming language has been used historically ensure that this is not duplicated
- Discuss victim blaming language in supervision and team meetings

How can we say it differently?

Some resources which may assist:

SSP - [Guidance for using appropriate language for those subject to or at risk of exploitation.](#)

SSP [child exploitation webpage](#) – various resources some relevant to adults.

[Appropriate language child sexual and or criminal exploitation guidance for professionals](#)

(The Children’s Society, Victim Support and NPCC)

Handout- [The Children’s Society Language Briefing](#)

Languaging Child and Adolescent Vulnerability’: [A Guide For Professionals, Practitioners and Partner Agencies supporting children and families in community settings](#)

NWG Webinar Making Words Matter webinar:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZtFUPQMNZk>

[Making Words Matter PDF](#)



Please complete the [evaluation form](#)