

North Somerset Council Children's Services

Language that cares guide

August 2024



What is language that cares?

In March 2019, TACT Fostering and Adoption published ‘Language That Cares: Changing the way professionals talk about Children in Care’.

“Professionals’ vocabulary would confuse me even when I was 15 [...] because it seemed to be all in some kind of professional, social worker code. Therefore, I can only imagine how confusing it must be for younger children to understand it all”.

- Ashleigh, TACT care experienced young person.

“I had to google words I don’t understand”

- Care-experienced young person in North Somerset



This is a useful and practical guide that challenges the language that is often used by those who work with children and young people who are care experienced. North Somerset Council support the use of Language that Cares and in response to this guide began reviewing the way professionals are using language to talk about children in care.

Children and young people in North Somerset, our own experts in care, began to talk about language and preferred terminology. To help break down some of the barriers around language, we have created the documents you’ll find in this guide to support children, young people, families and colleagues across the service.

‘Words can motivate and inspire. They can also damage and disempower. The words we are exposed to from birth not only drive our language development, but they shape the lenses through which we view the world. They form the narrative through which we think of ourselves. Words change lives.’

- Carmel Jacob-Thomson, Educational Psychologist and care-experienced person

Changing our labels

Our care-experienced young people have always been vocal about the impact our language has on their lives. We recognise that for statutory reasons certain terms became embedded in our practice over time. There may still be instances where

certain language must be used for statutory purposes, however, we must be hyper-aware of this and ensure such terms are used as sparingly as possible and never in communication or writing with children, young people, and families. It is our responsibility to be the generation of practitioners which change this language – via conscious and persistent attention to the words we (including our colleagues) use. Table 1 gives examples of simple changes to language which have a tremendous impact on how our care-experienced young people perceives themselves, their lives and futures, and those who care for them.

Word	Suggested Alternative
Aggressive	Assertive/Determined/Reacting to a situation
Disruptive	Expressive/Expressing a need/Needing Support or help
Loner	Shy/Independent/Happy on their own
Moody	Having a bad day/Having a bad moment
Risky	Unaware of a situation/Brave
Putting themselves at risk	Seeking reassurance elsewhere
Guarded	Anxious/Quiet/Scared
Sarcastic	Using humour as a coping mechanism/Has a good sense of humour
Untrusting	Cautious
Care leaver	Care Experienced person/Expert in care
Below average	Learning or developing at their own pace
Challenging	I found the behaviour challenging/In distress/Reacting to a situation/Upset/Unmet need
Difficult	Not understanding/Having a bad day or moment/Needing support/Struggling to cope
Attention Seeker	Looking for support/Unmet need
Defiant	Strong willed
Manipulative	Assertive/Intelligent
Sanctions	Consequences
Placement	Home
Siblings	Brothers or sisters
Abscond	Ran or run away
Residents	People/Young people
Contact	Family time/Spend time with
Unit	House/Home

LAC	Use their name! Young people/Care experienced young people
Non-engaging	Not ready – look at organisation and family approach
Non-compliant	Not ready – look at organisation and family approach
Promiscuous	Seeking comfort or reassurance elsewhere
Making bad choices (drug/alcohol related)	No or poor coping mechanisms/Seeking something/Survival mode
Hard to reach	Not approached enough – look at organisation and family approach
Service User	Use their name
Offender	Use their name
Respite	A short break for the child to feel more relaxed and supported/Sleepovers/Holiday/Time away/Visiting family or friends

Table 1: Alternatives to commonly used terms to discuss children and young people

Victim Blaming Language

Language used by safeguarding professionals impacts the lives of children and young people they care for. When completing reports detailing interactions with children and vulnerable adults, the language used needs to be truthful and factual. A certain amount of opinion and hypothesis may be appropriate when considering risk and making decisions with respect to a safeguarding response.

Appropriate terminology is crucial when used to discuss children and young people who have been exploited or are at risk of exploitation. Language implying that the child or young person is complicit in any way, or responsible for the crimes that have happened or may happen to them, must be avoided.

Victim-blaming language may reinforce messages from perpetrators around shame and guilt. This in turn may prevent the child or young person from disclosing their abuse, through fear of being blamed by professionals. When victim-blaming language is used among professionals, there is a risk of normalising and minimising the child’s experience, resulting in lack of an appropriate response.

Some of the terminology found within the children’s records:

- **Putting themselves at risk** - This implies that the child is responsible for the risks presented by the perpetrator and that they are able to make free and informed choices.
- **Involved in CSE** - This implies a level of choice regarding the child being abused. A five-year-old would never be referred to as being involved in sexual abuse for the same reasons.
- **He/she is choosing this lifestyle** - 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.
- **In a relationship with** - This implies that the child or young person is in a consensual relationship and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context.
- **Boyfriend/girlfriend** - This implies that the child or young person is in a consensual relationship and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context. Children have been challenged in court with practitioners' recordings where a practitioner has referred to the perpetrator as the child's boyfriend or girlfriend.
- **Spending time/associating with** - 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.
- **Promiscuous** - This implies consensual sexual activity has taken place. It is a judgemental term which stereotypes and labels people. It isn't appropriate in any context when discussing children and young people, particularly if it occurs within an abusive or exploitative context.
- **Prostituting themselves** - This implies that the child or young person is responsible for the abuse and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context. Changes in legislation have meant that child prostitution is no longer an acceptable term and should never be used.
- **Sexual activity with** - This implies consensual sexual activity has taken place. If it occurs within an abusive or exploitative context this term is not appropriate.
- **Sexually active since (age under 13)** - A child under 13 cannot consent to sex and is therefore being abused. This should be reflected in the language used.

- **Has been contacting adult males/females via phone or internet** - This implies that the child or young person is responsible for the communication and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context.

Exploitation is never the victim's fault. It is abuse.

Promoting language that cares

Clear — straightforward and understandable

Ask — the child or young person what words they prefer

Respect — what the child or young person says and use their chosen words

Explain — statutory terms that need to be used so their meaning is understood

Support — and kindly challenge other professionals to use language that cares

The Language Leaders – which backed by the Children's hearing Improvement Partnership and is made up of young people with lived experience and adults with lived and professional experience across the Hearings System – has developed a set of principles for those working with children and families:

- Words will be personalised to meet the individual needs of the child, including taking account of the child's own wishes and use of language
- All language used will be clear, easy to understand and will support children to be involved in decision making
- Reports, letters and discussions will reflect the strengths and positives in children's lives, ensuring they are balanced against any challenges and risks
- Only language which is non-stigmatising and protects children from blame or distress will be used



References

1. TACT Fostering and Adoption and Language that Cares inc. glossary
2. Change the language of care – the British Psychological Society
3. Keeping the Promise – SCRA's Language that Cares Guide
4. Language that Cares Guide – County Durham Council
5. Glossary co-produced with North Somerset Children in Care Council and North Somerset Care Leavers Forum

Additional documents – tri.x

Victim blaming language document

The Impact of Language on Parents

Glossary of Abbreviations – Work bank

Language circle What do these words mean