

Victim Blaming Language

Language used by safeguarding professionals, is very important. 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 in respect of a safeguarding response. However, practitioners need to be mindful of the language they use and be acutely aware that their documents may end up being used in court proceedings.

Appropriate terminology is particularly important 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. Language should reflect the presence of coercion and the lack of control young people have in abusive or exploitative situations and must recognise the severity of the impact that exploitation has on the child or young person. 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 amongst professionals, there is a risk of normalising and minimising the child's experience, resulting in lack of an appropriate response.

We must always be mindful that when we speak to young people who may have been targeted, groomed and coerced into criminal exploitation, we often get 'the voice of their perpetrators' as a response due them having been manipulated, coached and cognitive dissonance.

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.

Exploitation is never the victim's fault: view it as abuse

- **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.