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Appropriate Language

Guidance for Professionals

As a local authority we are on a journey to utilising and embedding Contextual Approaches to safeguarding. We need Council employees, representatives and partners to confidently and safely identify, assess and respond to children and families who experience harm outside of their home environment.

A key feature of the support we offer to residents and families is to think about the way we talk and describe the difficulties they may be facing. This includes how we can contribute to and get the best partnership response to help and assist them.

It is imperative that appropriate terminology is used when discussing 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 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 a lack of appropriate response.

Victim blaming language may reinforce messages from perpetrators around shame and guilt, which in turn may lead to a child not disclosing harm they have suffered.

For example:

"Their lifestyle choices keep placing them 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.

As professionals, it is vital that we lead the way in representing and advocating for our children and their families. The tones/content and words we use will have an impact and will lead the child/family to decide how they would wish to engage with you, as a professional. Poor language affects the ability to engage.

It is our responsibility to understand the context within which "choices" are made and our responsibility to recognise abuse: if we do not recognise the constrained circumstances within which victims make "choices", we will see them as being in control and not recognise their need for intervention and support. Intensive language risks damaging trust and reinforces the victim's own

sense of self blame.

Guidance for using appropriate language

The following table outlines terms that should not be used when discussing or recording issues of child exploitation and includes a list of appropriate alternative phrases.

INAPPROPRIATE TERM ✖	SUGGESTED ALTERNATIVES ✔
Spending time/associating with 'elders or adults of concern' **'Choosing to spend time 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.	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 using child protection processes.
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.	• 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.
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.	• 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.
He/she is choosing this lifestyle or **Lifestyle 'choices' are increasing his/her risk** 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.	• The child is being criminally exploited. • The child is being sexually exploited.
'The young person is dealing drugs for self gain' This implies the young person is gaining and receiving things in favour of their exploitation. We know that this is often a grooming technique and therefore this term does not recognise the exploitative context.	• The child/young person is being criminally exploited • The child/young person is being groomed
Recruit/run/work 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.	• The child/young person is being criminally exploited
Drug running – He/she is drug running 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	• Child criminal exploitation (CCE). • The child is being criminally exploited. • The child is being trafficked for purpose of criminal exploitation.

does not recognise 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.	• The young person says that they are in a relationship with a person and there are concerns about that person's age, the imbalance of power, exploitation and/or offending. • The young person has been/is being groomed, exploited and controlled.
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.	• The child is vulnerable to being sexually exploited. • The child is being sexually exploited.
Promiscuous This implies consensual sexual activity has taken place. Promiscuous is a judgemental term which stereotypes and labels people. It isn't appropriate in any context when discussing children and young people, but particularly if it occurs within an abusive or exploitative context.	• The child is vulnerable to being sexually exploited. • The child is being sexually exploited.
Involved in CSE This implies there is 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.	• The child is vulnerable to being sexually exploited. • The child is being sexually exploited.
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.	• The young person says that they are in a relationship with a person and there are concerns about that person's age, the imbalance of power, exploitation and/or offending. • The young person has been/is being groomed, exploited and controlled.

Offering him/her drugs seemingly in return for sex 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.	• The child is being sexually exploited. • There are concerns that the child has been raped. • 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.
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.	• Adult males/females may have been contacting the child. • The child may have been groomed. • There are concerns that the adult is facilitating communication with a child. • The child is vulnerable to online perpetrators. • There are concerns that others may be using online technology to access or abuse the child. • Adults appear to be using a range of methods to communicate with the child.
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.	• The child has been raped. • The child has been/may have been sexually abused. • Concerns exist that the child may have been coerced, exploited, or sexually abused.
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.	• The child has been sexually abused. • The child has been raped. • There are reports of sexual abuse. • The child has described sexual activity; however, concerns exist that they child may have been groomed and/or coerced.
Running County Lines 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	• The child(ren) in this location may be being trafficked and sexually/criminally exploited. • There may be harmful behaviours and or attitudes that exist towards violence and criminality within this area.

context.	• This environment may not be safe for these children. • The location/situation could increase the opportunity to abuse child(ren). • The child(ren) feel under threat/ coerced to remain in this location and/ or the grooming process is so powerful that the child believes this to be their choice. • The child(ren) do not feel safe enough to leave this location. **Note:** County Lines? Is s/he exploited through County Lines? This should always be framed as question where there is not an established link between County border locations or phone/social media 'lines' for the purpose of dealing/supply. There is a danger that broad use of the term 'County Lines' may distract practitioners from identifying and responding to children groomed, trafficked and exploited for the purpose of local drug dealing or supply.
They know right from wrong This implies that the child or young person/s are responsible for any exploitation they experience and does not consider the risk of threat, violence or coercion for young people in exploitative situations. This implies that they have the capacity to make a free and informed choice.	• The child/young person is being criminally exploited • Perpetrators are criminally exploiting them • The young person has been/is being groomed, exploited and controlled.
Despite the risk s/he continues to return to the location… This implies that the child or young people are 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.	• The child(ren) have an existing peer network in this location. • The child(ren) have an ownership or investment in the area. • The child(ren) considers themselves to be safe in this space/community/ neighbourhood. • The child(ren) did not consider themselves safe where they were. • The child(ren) have been groomed or coerced into being in this neighbourhood/location. • The child(ren) does not feel they have another safe place to go. • The location/situation could increase the opportunity to abuse child(ren).

	• The child(ren) feel under threat/ coerced to remain in this location. • The child(ren) do not feel safe enough to leave this location.

Change the narrative – make words matter