

Language that Cares

Language Guidance - Children, Young People and Learning

Purpose

This guidance is intended to support practice, and gain consistency on the use of strengths-based language in writing, recording and practice. It should be read alongside the [Glossary of Terms](#) and [Acronym Guide](#), and other resources hyperlinked through the document. The guidance is not comprehensive or prescriptive, but its principles can be applied throughout our work with children and families. All resources linked in this document and further resources on Language can be found here: [Children Services Policy and Practice Guidance - Language that Cares - All Documents](#)

Introduction

The guidance has been written collaboratively by practitioners across Children Young People and Learning (CYPL) as part of the Language Project, and aims to put in to practice recommendations made by the West Sussex Children in Care Council (CICC) and Care Leavers Advisory Board (CLAB) in their [CLAB Language that Cares](#) document and [video](#), the work of Rebekah Pierre in her [Open Letter to the Social Worker Who Wrote My Case Files](#), and wider developments highlighting the importance of strengths-based and trauma-informed language in our work with children and families.

The language we use has a significant impact on the children, young people and families we work with, both now and when records are accessed in the future. We want our communication to be inclusive and affirming, and free from derogatory, discriminatory, or oppressive language or labels. We strive to use language that is empathic, accessible, strengths-based and non-judgmental in line with a Motivational Interviewing approach, and reflecting a collaborative practice that highlights families' autonomy, dignity and right to choose.

This might feel more challenging when there is a need to raise concerns about parenting and/or harm to children. Child safety is paramount, and in this context it is important to use clear, accessible language whilst also being factual and specific; balancing strengths with concerns, whilst also being clear and transparent about any potential outcomes for parents and families.

As adults working with children and young people at key stages in their lives, we remain committed to holding each other to account for the language we use when talking and writing about children. We recognise that changing habitual language can take time, and practice. A core principle of this guidance is to give permission to constructively and professionally challenge each other on our use of language, to support an environment where respectful language is learned, supported and expected.

Core Principles

- Ask children, young people and families their preferred names / terms, and use this in our communication and recording.
- Use the words of children and families to describe their experiences.
- Ensure views and opinions are not written as facts.
- Write to the child wherever possible and appropriate.
- Use plain language that avoids jargon and acronyms where possible.
- Consider cultural, identity and linguistic difference, and ensure language is understandable and accessible.
- Challenge each other with kindness and respect on our use of language.

Glossary of Terms

This [Glossary of Terms](#) includes suggestions from both the Care Leavers Advisory Board and the Language Project and lists alternatives to some commonly used words and phrases in social care recording. These terms have been re-phrased to take a more strengths-based and trauma-informed perspective on language used to describe the presentation and behaviour of children and families. This is a working document, to be updated over time.

Acronyms

Avoid using acronyms wherever possible, especially reports, assessments, letters, emails. If you do, define them first. An extensive list of commonly used acronyms in both social care and education is available here: [Acronym List](#). This is a working document, to be updated over time.

Specific Service Areas

Below lists more detailed guidance in relation to some specific areas of work where language choices can make a real difference. This is not a comprehensive list, but the principles can be applied to any service area.

Children with Disabilities

For children and young people with complex needs and disabilities every child's communication, language and presentation are different. We will not be prescriptive in the methods we use to write to or about the children and families we work alongside. We will be creative and consistent in ensuring the voice, views, and feelings of those we work with are heard, recorded and shared appropriately, whilst adhering to the key principles of language that cares. Further detailed guidance on the use of language when working with **children with disabilities** can be found [here](#). A Language Guide written by Young Voices can be seen [here](#).

Domestic Abuse and Exploitation

When discussing domestic abuse and/or exploitation it is important to avoid stigmatising labels and victim-blaming language. We will be mindful that victims/survivors may have constrained choices in terms of their contact with alleged perpetrators, and avoid putting the blame or responsibility solely on them. We will use descriptive language to describe harmful behaviour rather than generalising and/or labelling it as 'domestic violence', 'abuse' or 'exploitation'. We will be clear in our records if what we are seeing is domestic abuse or exploitation: is the individual fearful? is there a power imbalance? Further detailed guidance on the use of language when working with **child exploitation** can be found [here](#), and in **domestic abuse** [here](#)

Race, Ethnicity and Racial Justice

The language we use to discuss race, ethnicity and racial injustice is important. Getting this right can support open and honest conversation, help to form an inclusive culture in the workplace, and earn trust from our colleagues and the children and families we work with. It is recommended to always ask people how they would prefer their ethnicity to be described. Wherever possible be specific about the community or people in question. 'Umbrella' labels such as 'BAME' or 'Global Majority' can homogenise communities and overlook their diverse experiences. Building on your awareness and understanding of race, ethnicity and racial injustice will further your vocabulary and confidence in this area and we encourage you to attend the available equality, diversity and inclusion training. Further detailed guidance on the use of language in relation to **race, ethnicity and racial justice** can be found here: [Race and Ethnicity Terminology](#).

LGBTQ+

LGBTQ+ identities, language and terminology are ever evolving as people discover more about themselves. It is not uncommon for people to identify with one term and discover something else fits better after some time has passed. Therefore, it is advised to regularly check with people as to how they identify, and how they would like to be referred to in their paperwork and documentations. A full list of **LGBTQ+** terms can be found [here](#).

Family Court and Legal Proceedings

The language used within the family court and legal proceedings is often unnecessarily complex. ‘Combative’ language can set families and professionals in opposition to each other, be a barrier to families’ understanding of events, and cause further stress in an already pressured environment. The [Family Justice Board Quality Circle Language Practice Statement](#) provides clear guidance on the use of language this area. The Family Solutions Group [Language Matters - a review of language for separating families](#) provides further detail.

Children’s Residential Services:

Children’s Residential Services have specific guidance about good quality record keeping which supports person-centred practice and allows staff to write records that reflect the individual personalities, behaviours, habits, and interests of all children. Children are also routinely involved in the process of gathering and recording information about them, in line with their age and understanding. Children’s records are regarded as live documents that need regular updating. Staff should encourage children and young people to reflect on and understand their history and support them to contribute to their records in a way that reflects their voice, views, wishes and feelings. Children should also be encouraged to keep appropriate memorabilia of their time spent living at the Home, and to record significant life events. Further detailed guidance on the use of language in relation to **Children’s Residential Services** can be found [here](#) and their guidance on case recording [here](#).

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