Language Guide for Practitioners - Harm Outside of the Home

Introduction

This guide has been created to support those working with children, families and the community across Tees to think about the language they use when working with children subject to **Harm Outside of their Homes**. The Tees Harm Outside of the Home Strategy identifies the harm that children and young people experience outside of their homes as:

- Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (CSA&E)
- Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)
- Online Exploitation
- Trafficking and Modern Slavery

In addition, risks associated with:
- Missing from home, care or education
- Radicalisation and Extremism

When describing children and young people's experiences, any language that implies that a child, young person or group of young people are complicit or responsible for the harm they may suffer outside of their homes or crimes that they may be victim/s of, should always be challenged. Our language should always recognise and be responsive to trauma resulting from the harm children/young people have experienced. If professionals and support services don't make these considerations, this may contribute to the continuing victimisation of children and young people and prevent young people and those that care for them from accessing the right help at the right time for them.

This guide aims to support professionals in using trauma-informed descriptions of the child's lived experiences. It outlines terms that are *victim-blaming* and should not be used when discussing or recording a child's experiences and includes a list of alternative, appropriately worded phrases and narratives.

What is victim blaming language? Victim blaming language refers to any language that implies, intentionally or unintentionally, that a victim is responsible for the abuse they have experienced. The language we use is shaped by and normalised within the cultures we work, live, and spend time in. As language evolves, phrases that were once commonly accepted may no longer be appropriate. Therefore, it is crucial to maintain an open and reflective attitude to make sure that our language evolves in a way that supports and respects all individuals.

Victim-blaming Terms and Phrases

Term	Impact
Boyfriend, girlfriend, partner or in a relationship with	This implies that the child or person is in a consensual relationship and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context including an imbalance of power or coercion and control. Referring to their abuse as a legitimate relationship could reaffirm the lies and manipulation used by abusers. It can also negatively impact victims receiving justice and abusers being sentenced appropriately, as seen in cases where child and adult victims have been challenged in court with recordings of where a practitioner has referred to the abuser as their boyfriend, girlfriend, or partner.

Alternatives:

- The child or person says that they are in a relationship with a person. However, there are concerns about consent due to that person's age, the imbalance of power, and/or indicators of exploitation and abuse.
- The child or person has been/is being groomed, exploited, and/or controlled.
- This person is not providing a healthy or safe relationship for the child or person.
- The child or person is using language that implies they may be the victim of grooming or coercion.

Term	Impact
Compliant	This term suggests that the victim is willingly participating in their exploitation and/or abuse, which undermines the nature of coercion and control. It wrongly implies a level of consent that is not present.

Alternatives:

- The child or person may appear to comply due to fear or manipulation.
- The child or person is experiencing coercion and control.
- The child or person's behaviour may be a survival strategy.
- The child or person may be under significant duress.
- The child or person's actions should be viewed in the context of their abuse.

Term	Impact
Drug running, runner, working, money mule, child is recruiting others / is a perpetrator	Terms like these may appear useful in identifying the situation a young person is in, but they risk being dehumanising and adultifying. These terms imply that the child or person is responsible for the exploitation and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. They do not recognise the abusive or exploitative context. Using terms which imply legitimate action or employment minimise the child or person's experience of abuse. Criminalising the child or person is a tactic used by abusers to protect themselves from prosecution. Referring to the child or person as willingly complicit reinforces the tactics used by abusers. A child should be seen and described as a child, even if they have been or are facing criminal charges.

Alternatives:

- They may be being exploited, abused, or trafficked for the purposes of sexual or criminal exploitation.
- They are being considered a perpetrator although the offences they committed were due to them being a victim of exploitation and/or modern slavery.
- The child or person has been forced or coerced to carry out a crime.
- The child has been targeted by abusers and is being groomed or made to distribute drugs.
- The child is a victim of human trafficking and is being criminally exploited.
- The child is being trafficked for the purpose of criminal exploitation.

Term	Impact
Has been contacting adults via phone or online	This implies that the child or young person is or was responsible for the communication and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context, playing in to the grooming and manipulation used by abusers. Focusing on the actions of the victim as opposed to the abuser can reinforce the belief that the child or person is to blame for the abuse they have experienced. Using online spaces is part of most people's everyday lives. The anonymised nature of online spaces makes it easy to connect without sharing personal details, and abusers can exploit this to conceal their identities and motives.

Alternatives:

- There are concerns that the adult is facilitating or seeking communication with a child or with children.
- There are concerns that others may be using online technology to access or abuse the child.
- Abusers appear to be using a range of methods to communicate with the child or with children.
- The child or person is being targeted online with a view to exploiting/abusing them

Term	Impact
Involved in… (They are involved in a gang or criminality, they are involved in CSE)	This implies there is a level of choice regarding the child being abused.

Alternatives:

- The child or person is a victim of sexual exploitation.
- The child or person is being criminally exploited (for example, to distribute drugs, hold weapons, store money, or similar). The child is being exploited.
- The child is a victim of human trafficking and/or modern slavery (where their exploitation involves being recruited, moved, or held by an abuser).

Term	Impact
Offered / accepted alcohol, drugs, vapes, or other substances in return for sex, or 'X'	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. It is widely known that abusers use drugs, alcohol, vapes, and other intoxicants to abuse children. Equally, gifts of all kinds are a common grooming method. Criminalising the child or person is a tactic used by abusers to protect themselves from prosecution. Referring to the child or person as willingly complicit reinforces the tactics used by abusers.

Alternatives:

- The child or person is being sexually and/or criminally exploited.
- Drugs or alcohol are being used to facilitate the child or person's exploitation.
- The abuser is using debt bondage to trap and continue to control and exploit the child or person.
- There are concerns that the child has been raped as they did not have the freedom or capacity to consent.
- The abuser is sexually abusing the child or person

Term	Impact
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. The term child prostitution has been removed from legislation, which makes clear that this is no longer an acceptable term and should never be used.

Alternatives:

- The child is a victim of sexual abuse and/or exploitation.
- The child is a victim of human trafficking and/or modern slavery (where their exploitation involves being recruited, moved, or held by an abuser, which is highly likely in this context).
- The abuser has raped or facilitated the child being raped.

Term	Impact
Putting themselves at risk	This implies that the child is responsible for the risks presented by the abuser and that they are able to make free and informed choices without recognition of their age, circumstances, and lived experience or the realities of grooming, coercion, and control. It implies they have chosen to be at risk and discounts the lack of accessible safe options or the power to say no.

Alternatives:

- The child may have been groomed or exploited
- 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 reduces the child's safety
- The location is dangerous to children
- The location/situation could increase the 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/exploited
- It is unclear why the child is getting into (X) vehicle / visiting (X) location
- 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

Term	Impact
Spending time or associating with	When this is used in an exploitative context, it implies that the child or person is choosing to be in contact with the person grooming or exploiting them. It also implies shared culpability for any abusive or criminal acts carried out by the person they are described as being with. In reality a child who is being coerced, controlled, or manipulated does not have the capacity to make a free and informed choice.

Alternatives:

- The child or person says that they are friends with a person. However, there are concerns about that person's age and/or an imbalance of power, or indicators of grooming, exploitation, and/or abuse.
- The child or person has been groomed, exploited, coerced, or controlled into criminal activity.
- The child is a victim of child criminal exploitation

Term	Impact
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 and should not be used. It is never appropriate where the victim has been unable give consent through choice and has not had the freedom and capacity to make that choice. The victim does not have freedom or capacity to consent when:

- they are asleep or unconscious
- physical force is used against them
- they are intoxicated, 'drunk' or 'high' on alcohol or drugs
- they are under the age of 16
- they are 16 or 17 and the other person taking part in sexual activity is in a position of trust, such as a police officer, teacher, doctor, or social worker.
- they are under the age of 18 and have been photographed or filmed engaging in sexual activity
- they have a mental health condition or disability that impacts their ability to make choices
- they are being pressured, bullied, manipulated, tricked, or scared into saying 'yes'

Alternatives:

- The abuser has raped the child or person.
- The child or person has been or may have been sexually abused.
- Concerns exist that the child or person may have been coerced, exploited, raped, or sexually abused.

Term	Impact
They are 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 factors.

Alternatives:

- The child or person is a victim of exploitation or abuse.
- The child or person is being trafficked for purpose of exploitation.
- A child can never consent to their own exploitation.
- The child or person may have experienced repeat targeting by abusers, including grooming and coercion, and lack access to safe options.
- The child or person is under coercion and control and unable to freely choose

Term	Impact
They need to take responsibility for their behaviour	It may feel as though a child is making choices and poor decisions, but no child or person is responsible for their own exploitation. Exploiters use manipulation and grooming to coerce children and people into criminal or sexual activity. The only person responsible is the exploiter.

Alternatives:

- The child or person needs support to understand the complex nature of exploitation.
- The child or person need support to understand what exploitation is, and how they have been groomed.
- The child or person needs support to understand that only the exploiter is responsible for what happened to them, and they are not to blame.
- The child or person needs help and support to understand how the exploiter is harming them and that they do not have their best interests in mind.

Other Inappropriate Terms and Phrases

Term	Impact
Child pornography or indecent images	This term fails to acknowledge the grooming, coercion, and exploitation that has led to the resulting material. The use of this terms implies it is a sub-category of legal, acceptable pornography, rather than a form of child abuse and crime. This also doesn't address the long-lasting impact on victims and the need for help and support, nor does it recognise the risk posed by abusers. It is illegal for anyone to hold, share, or sell child sexual abuse material and it is important to consider whether contact sexual abuse may also be taking place.

Alternatives:

- Child sexual abuse material.
- This child may have been coerced into sharing child sexual abuse material.
- The abuser has created child sexual abuse material.

Term	Impact
Broken, damaged, troubled	These terms minimise the impact of abuse and fail to acknowledge the abuser(s) as responsible for deliberately causing harm. These terms also fail to acknowledge any strengths or positives that exists in the child or person's life which can impact the way other professionals respond to them. It's important to recognise that we only know part of what a victim is coping with, and that they may require support alongside or prior to engaging with justice.

Alternatives:

- This child or person has or may have experienced or is living with trauma.
- This child or person has experienced exploitation and/or abuse and may need support.

Term	Impact
Chaotic lifestyle	This term can imply the child or young person is at fault for their lack of safety. It denies them agency, while also failing to recognise the complex factors that can mean someone has limited options for achieving and sustaining safety and security. Frequent changes can be a trauma response, so reframing these conversations to name the specific concerns can help avoid applying a problematic label.

Alternatives:

- This child or person has not been able to access effective support to enable them to work towards sustainable security or safety.
- This child or person is possibly living with trauma.
- This child or person may need access to a range of support options, which they can choose to engage with as and when they are ready and able.
- The child or person lacks security and safety.

Term	Impact
Mature for their age	This phrase is most often used when discussing females who believe they are in a consensual relationship with someone who is older. The risk and harm posed to the child can be over-looked when professionals use this description, as it fails to recognise their status as a child. The phrase can be applied to children of any gender but is often used to describe girls to normalise or validate the age gap between them and an older male. Black children and young people are particularly at risk of adultification by professionals. They are less likely to be viewed as victims and are seen to have more agency, autonomy, and choice than they

Alternatives:

- The victim is a child or young person and says that they are in a relationship with a person but there are concerns about that person's age, the imbalance of power, exploitation and/or offending.
- The child or young person has been, or is being groomed, exploited, and controlled.
- We are concerned the child or young person has described an abusive or coercive relationship.
- The abuser has manipulated the child or young person to believe they are in a relationship.

Term	Impact
Peer on peer abuse	The use of this term only recognises the harm and abuse that may happen to children of a similar age or developmental stage and fails to acknowledge that harm or abuse may be inflicted by children towards children of any age or developmental stage. It is also important to recognise the power imbalance that exists between children based on differences in personal characteristics such as age, ability, class, and gender.

Alternatives:

- Child on child abuse is taking place.
- The situation described is child on child abuse

Term	Impact
Plugging, banking, bottling, or stuffing	These slang terms are used to describe the practice that involves packages of drugs being inserted into a child or person's body, commonly the rectum or vagina alongside oral ingestion. The informality of these terms does not reflect the reality of what is happening to a child or person. When used, they minimise the abuse that a child has experienced. By using slang terms that abusers may also use, professionals risk negatively reinforcing the narrative of choice and blame. While this practice isn't legally recognised as sexual abuse, the child or person should be given a response that recognises the sexual trauma they have experienced.

Alternatives:

- The child or person has been coerced to internally conceal drugs.
- The child or person has been coerced or forced to carry drugs internally

Term	Impact
Promiscuous	This implies consensual sexual activity has taken place. The word 'promiscuous' is a judgemental term based on assumptions. It also includes a significant gender bias as it is rarely applied to boys and men. It falsely implies the victim may be complicit in the grooming and abuse, a tactic used by abusers to diminish their responsibility. It isn't appropriate in any context when discussing children

Alternatives:

- The child or person is a victim of sexual abuse and/or exploitation.
- The child or person is a victim of human trafficking and/or modern slavery (where their exploitation involves being re-cruited, moved, or held by an abuser).
- The abuser has used coercion and control to exploit the child or person.
- This child or person may be the victim of repeated exploitation or targeted revictimisation by one or more abusers.

Term	Impact
Will not cooperate / engage	This implies that it is the child's responsibility to engage with services, rather than the services responsibility to safeguard the child. It implies that services are seen as safe and supportive to all children and doesn't recognise negative experiences the victim may have had from professionals or those in positions in power. It also fails to acknowledge the ongoing risk or harm the person may be experiencing which prevents them from seeking or accepting support. This term implies the victim accepts they are a victim of exploitation and/or abuse; yet many children and people do not recognise they are a victim.

Alternatives:

- The child did not feel safe enough to disclose
- The child appears to fear negative repercussions for disclosure
- The child is being criminally/sexually exploited and or groomed and therefore is not able to disclose.
- Child considers the relationship to be consensual however the relationship has been formed in the context of exploitation