The Language of Mental Health
What do you need to know?

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The language professionals use can unintentionally impact and stigmatise children through the words they use and the attitudes they convey about mental health. This is also true about what is written in children's electronic records.

Language is extremely powerful and can have a lasting impact. Labels placed on children can become a part of their personal identity and sense of self, which can perpetuate through behaviours and internalised feelings. Language is cultural, and professional discourse can become so ingrained and habitual. People desensitise themselves to the words and terms that can be emotionally scarring to those they describe.

Mental health language used in generic terms can easily stigmatise children. It does not describe the impact of their experiences, can lead to children feeling dismissed, blamed or broken.

This guide aims to give some examples of language and its impact, which some suggestions on how to improve language in both written and verbal forms.

1. Labelling in a Negative Manner

Using phrases like:

"He's just a problem child"

or

"She's always difficult"

can reinforce negative self-perceptions.

- Instead, describe the issues neutrally and focusing on support is more effective.

Use of language such as:

'the child is being aggressive',

without understanding what may be driving this behaviour, dismisses the possible impact that the child's experiences may be having on them.

- Instead, describe the incident, not the behaviour, this will enable others who are listening or reading to think objectively about the incident and reduce judgments.

2. Diagnosing

Mental health language has become common place in recent years. Professionals should not use, and should discourage the use of diagnostic language when a disorder has not been diagnosed by an appropriately qualified professional. Use of diagnostic language can be really confusing for children. It can suggest that normal emotions or behaviours are a medical issue promoting a sense of requiring "fixing".

Examples of this may include:

They are a bit OCD

- Instead describe what is meant by the behaviour. OCD is a debilitating condition which is rooted in reoccurring thoughts and repetitive behaviours that can not be controlled, it is not about being ordered and tidy.

They are depressed

- Remember, sadness is a normal emotion that many children will experience. Depression is persistent sadness for weeks or months.

They have anxiety:

- Feeling anxious is a normal emotion in response to something, such as exam stress or stressful events. Anxiety disorders are a group of diagnoses, where anxiety is persistent and impacting on normal daily functioning

3. Self-Harm

Self-harm is particularly sensitive for children, families and professionals, it can make us feel extremely fearful and can prompt the use of emotive, or conversely very professional-ised language. It is important that we take care when talking about or recording self-harm. We should remain factual and avoid umbrella terms.

The child is a self-harmer, self-harming, lacerating

- Instead describe the action, the impact of the incident types of injury and any interventions required accurately.

  For Example:

  The child has been overwhelmed, they used (implement) to cut their arms, the wound was light, required cleaning, but did not require dressings or any other medical intervention

Superficial self-harm

- Instead, describe the self-harm, the injury and any treatment required

This phrase dismisses the emotional pain that someone is feeling when they self-harm.

The emotions will not have been superficial.

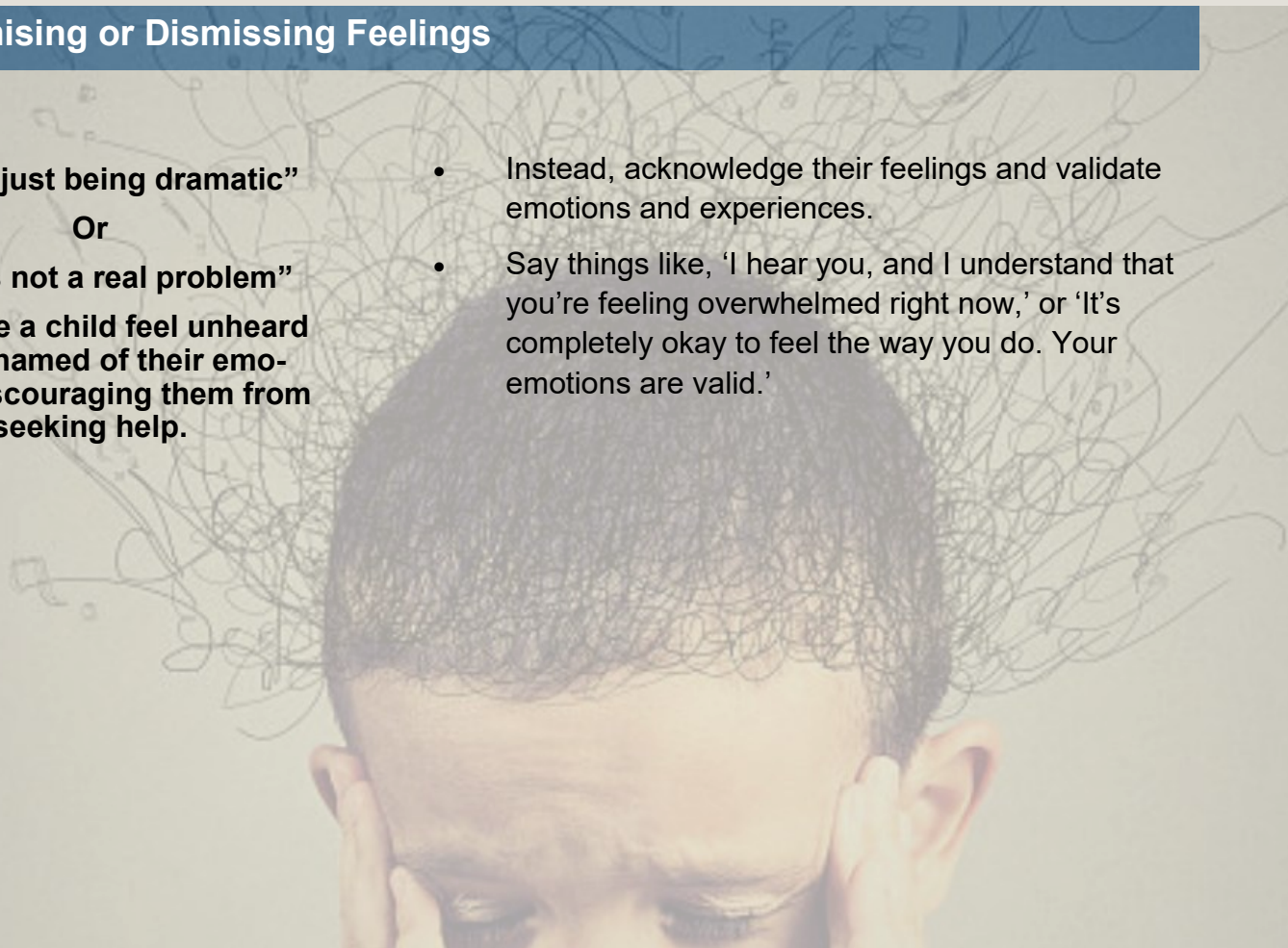## 4. Minimising or Dismissing Feelings

Saying

"You're just being dramatic"

Or

"That's not a real problem"

can make a child feel unheard and ashamed of their emotions, discouraging them from seeking help.

- Instead, acknowledge their feelings and validate emotions and experiences.

- Say things like, 'I hear you, and I understand that you're feeling overwhelmed right now,' or 'It's completely okay to feel the way you do. Your emotions are valid.'

5. Using Deficit-Based Language

Focusing on what a child "lacks" rather than their strengths can be damaging.

For instance:
"He's bad at focusing,"

- Instead try "He's working on improving his focus."

6. Associating Mental Health Struggles with Weakness

Statements like:

"Toughen up"

or

"You need to be stronger"

can make children feel that experiencing emotions is a sign of failure rather than a natural human experience.

- Instead, validate their feelings and emotions. Try:

'It's completely okay to feel the way you do. Your emotions are valid.'

'It is brave to talk about how your are feeling'

'Asking for help is not a weakness, it is a strength.'

7. Language Table

Phrase	Impact	Alternative
He's just a problem child	Can reinforce negative self perceptions	Describe the issues neutrally and focusing on support is more effective.
She's always difficult	dismisses the possible impact that the child's experiences may be having on them.	Try to understand what may be driving this behaviour, The child can find it hard to follow instructions when they (insert feeling)
'the child is being aggressive'	Labelling language can make the child feel like they are the issue	describe the incident, not the behaviour, this will enable others who are listening or reading to think objectively about the incident and reduce judgments

Phrase	Things to remember
They are a bit OCD	OCD is a debilitating condition which is rooted in reoccurring thoughts and repetitive behaviours that cannot be controlled, it is not about being ordered and tidy.
They are depressed	Sadness is a normal emotion that many children will experience. Depression is persistent sadness for weeks or months
They have anxiety	Feeling anxious is a normal emotion in response to something, such as exam stress or stressful events. Anxiety disorders are a group of diagnoses, where anxiety is persistent and impacting on normal daily functioning

Phrase	Alternative	Example
The child is a self-harmer Self-harming	Instead describe the action, the impact of the incident types of injury and any interventions required accurately.	The child has been overwhelmed, they used (implement) to cut their arms, the wound was light, required cleaning, but did not require dressings or any other medical
Superficial self-harm	This phrase dismisses the emotional pain that someone is feeling when they self-harm. The emotions will not have been superficial.	Child was feeling distressed, and to manage their distress they made light scratches to their forearm
The child has lacerated their arms	This can mean many different things	Be clear about the wound, the action and the severity of the injury

7. Language Table

Phrase	Impact	Alternative Validating Statements
"Toughen up" or "You need to be stronger"	Can make children feel that experiencing emotions is a sign of failure rather than a natural human experience	It's completely okay to feel the way you do
		Your emotions are valid
		'It is brave to talk about how your are feeling
		'Asking for help is not a weakness, it is a strength

Phrase	Impact	Alternative
You're just being dramatic	can make a child feel unheard and ashamed of their emotions, discouraging them from seeking help	'I hear you
That's not a real problem		and I understand that you're feeling overwhelmed right now
		Your emotions are valid
		It's completely okay to feel the way you do..