

Appropriate Language in Relation to Child Exploitation



Guidance for Professionals

This document seeks to provide guidance to professionals on the appropriate use of language when discussing children and their experience of exploitation in a range of contexts. These include when speaking directly with or discussing children, within recording and case management systems and when delivering relevant training or other learning interventions. The document can inform and help frame discussions during child protection and multi-agency meetings, or other settings where professionals are discussing children and young people who are at risk of or subjected to exploitation or any activity an agency undertakes to disrupt and tackle child exploitation.

We hope this guidance will influence both the direct practice of professionals who are responding to children subjected to exploitation as well as wider organisational culture across safeguarding partnerships.

This is the latest version of The Children's Society's Appropriate Language guide which we first created in 2017.

About Appropriate Language

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 responsible in any way for abuse and crime that they are subjected to, must be avoided to ensure we safeguard them appropriately. It is also important to recognise that a child cannot consent to their own exploitation.

Some professionals may find it frustrating to be asked to change their vocabulary, but the more we speak and listen to victims and survivors of exploitation, the better we understand how our language can impact them and the support that they receive. Such changes can make a significant difference not only to the young people with whom we work, but also to our own mindset and decision-making alongside influencing the approach of others given that the language we use to describe things shapes how we perceive them.

Watch the Waltham Forest Council Victim Blaming Language [video](#) created by young people.

We recognise that individuals rarely intend to use language that is victim blaming and often do so unconsciously. The language we use is shaped by and normalised within the cultures we work, live, and spend time in. Language is always changing and developing and terms that were common and accepted in the recent past may no longer be. It is important to have an open and reflective mindset to ensure we all adapt, just as language does over time.

Victim-blaming language can reinforce and perpetuate the shame and guilt that perpetrators encourage in their victims as a method of control. It can also strengthen emotional bonds between victims and perpetrators, creating a mind-set in which both exploiter and exploited are blameworthy and united as 'part of a team'. It can further create barriers between professionals and young people as it may lead to a young person thinking they will not be believed or supported if they share their experience of abuse. This message is often reinforced by exploiters who will try and distance the young person from safeguarding professionals and positive influences.

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The persistent use of victim-blaming terminology is likely to alter the perspective of a professional. This language is both symptomatic of and a contributor towards compassion fatigue and can therefore also have a negative impact on staff wellbeing and effective practice across teams and services.

Adultification happens when preconceptions held about children, lead to them being treated and perceived as being more 'adult-like' (Goff et al, 2014, Davis, J. and Marsh, N. (2020).

Where children are 'seen' as more adult-like, further assumptions may be made about a child, including the perception that they have more agency, autonomy, and choice, than they actually do. It is likely that these perceptions of children will transfer into the language used to describe them, affecting the ways in which they are supported and safeguarded by professionals.

Adultification disproportionately affects black boys as evidenced in a number of serious case reviews in recent years. It stems from bias and prejudice which perpetuates negative stereotypes and racism and can lead to significant safeguarding failures.

This is reflective of other forms of discrimination and it is therefore important for professionals to be aware of all biases and areas of systemic oppression which impact children's lives. These can be present in any work force and we therefore recommend that all organisations ensure an intersectional and anti-oppressive approach is taken when working with and safeguarding children.

Adultification is discussed in the context of safeguarding black boys from exploitation in this [article](#) by Jahnine Davis and Nick Marsh and in the Vulnerability Knowledge Practice Programme [Exploitation Spotlight briefing](#).

Consider the influence of your language within written information and how that may alter the perspective and practice of any professional it is shared with. The language you use can change the responses to and outcomes for a young person and can do so even when you are no longer supporting them.

When working with young people it can be helpful to listen to and engage with the language and terminology they use while sharing alternatives. Doing so may form part of work to help them understand exploitation and healthy relationships where this is needed and at its best, may help the young person to reframe their experiences and recognise that what happened to them wasn't their fault. This will be very dependent on the relationship between each professional and young person and sometimes doing this may harm the relationship. It is also

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important for professionals to consider how different terms might feel for a young person to hear when used to describe them, including being labelled as a victim of exploitation, trafficking, or modern slavery. While such terms are useful for discussions between professionals, they may feel disempowering for young people themselves. Ultimately only you as a professional can understand this dynamic and can work with the young person to identify terms you are both comfortable with using.

The term modern slavery is set out in the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and describes organised criminal activity including sexual and criminal exploitation, forced labour and domestic servitude. Whilst it is useful in a range of contexts to describe and take appropriate action against serious organised crime and is recommended throughout this guide, it is important to consider the wider context and history of the term 'slavery' and the connotations it may have for different people including young people themselves. In the minds of many the term 'slavery' refers to the transatlantic slave trade and the British Empire's key role in the 400-year period of mass scale systemic oppression, torture, and murder of millions of Africans.

There are therefore some concerns that the term modern slavery may trivialise or relativise such historic slavery. At the same time, it is important to recognise that the practice of slavery did not begin or end with the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade and continued to take place in a range of contexts around the world up to and including the present day. Modern perpetrators including Organised Crime Groups also use tactics of control and coercion that echo those used historically including violence, abuse, holding people in captivity, and the targeting of marginalised groups with false promises of material and social gain.

When considering the use of this term in conversations with young people, consider how it might feel to be described as a 'slave', what it might mean for them, and consider alternatives. Where it is likely that a child may hear or read the term being used to describe them, we recommend making space to explore the term with them, and why professionals may use it. Ensure there is time and space for the young person to talk about how the term impacts them if they want to and come to an agreement on the language that is used between you. Where relevant, then advocate for a change in language from other professionals who may use the term in conversation with the young person.

For more information on attending to language when working with children subject to or at risk of exploitation we recommend reading the NWG, SPACE and Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust's Practice and Knowledge briefing [Making Words Matter](#).

Language of Concern and Suggested Alternatives

Inappropriate Term	Suggested Alternatives
<p>Sexual activity with....</p> <p>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.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The perpetrator has raped the child. • The child has been/may have been sexually abused. • Concerns exist that the child may have been coerced, exploited, raped, or sexually abused.
<p>In a relationship with...</p> <p>This implies that the child or young person is in a consensual relationship and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context including the use of coercion and control by the perpetrator.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. • The perpetrator has manipulated the child/young person to believe they are in a relationship.
<p>Putting themselves at risk</p> <p>This implies that the child is responsible for the risks presented by the perpetrator and that they can make free and informed choices without recognition of the child's age, circumstances and lived experience or the realities of grooming, coercion, and control.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The child may have been groomed. • There are a lack of protective factors surrounding the child. • The situation could reduce the child's safety. • The location is dangerous to children. • It is unclear whether the child is under duress to go missing. • There are concerns that the child may be being exploited. • It is unclear why the child is getting into [x] vehicle or 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.

Inappropriate Term

Suggested Alternatives

Promiscuous

This implies consensual sexual activity has taken place. The word 'promiscuous' is a judgemental term based on assumptions and includes a significant gender bias as it is rarely applied to boys and men.

It isn't appropriate in any context when discussing children and young people, and particularly if it occurs within an abusive or exploitative context.

- 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 a perpetrator)
- The perpetrator has used coercion and control to exploit the child.

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 it is no longer an acceptable term and should never be used.

- 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 a perpetrator which is highly likely in this context).
- The perpetrator has raped or facilitated the child being raped.

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 context.

- The child is a victim of human trafficking and is being exploited.
- The child is being trafficked for purpose of exploitation.
- A child can never consent to their own exploitation.

Inappropriate Term

Suggested Alternatives

Has been contacting adults 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.

- There are concerns that the adult is facilitating communication with a child.
- 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.

Involved in CSE/CCE...

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 a victim of sexual exploitation.
- The child is being criminally exploited for example to distribute drugs/hold weapons/store money etc. 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 a perpetrator)

Boyfriend/Girlfriend

This implies that the child or young person is in a consensual relationship and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context including imbalance of power or coercion and control.

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 however, 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
- This person is not a healthy or safe relationship for the child.

Inappropriate Term

Drug running – He/She/They are 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 does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.

Suggested Alternatives

- The child is a victim of human trafficking and is being criminally exploited to distribute drugs
- The child is being trafficked for the purpose of criminal exploitation.

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 has been targeted by perpetrators and is being groomed 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.

Spending time/associating with 'elders'

When this is used in an exploitative context, this implies that the child or young person is choosing to be in contact with the person grooming or exploiting them. When in reality a child who is being coerced, controlled, or manipulated does not have the capacity to make a free and informed choice.

- The young person says that they are friends with a person however, 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.

Reframing the term 'money mules' to Child Financial Exploitation

Children and young people can be financially exploited in a range of ways (see our [CYP and Modern Slavery guide](#) for more information). The emergence of internet banking, online gaming and social media has created further spaces and opportunities for perpetrators to target and exploit children for financial gain.

Where young people's bank accounts have been used for fraudulent and illegal activity, agencies are often referring to these young people as 'money mules'.

Why is it a problem?

The term 'money mules' is problematic because it is essentially describing these children as animals, namely mules or donkeys. Dehumanising language is never advisable and risks reinforcing negative narratives and stereotypes of child victims as offenders. It also risks creating negative self-image amongst young people.

The term 'money mule' is also unhelpful because it focuses the conversation entirely on the person's actions – in this case fraudulent bank activity – and ignores the complexity of the situation and the child's exploitation while implying consent and agency. In the same way that describing a criminal exploited young person groomed into county lines as a 'drug dealer' is unhelpful, so is the use of the term 'money mules' in this context.

The reality

Describing children whose bank accounts are used for criminal activity as 'money mules', ignores the full reality of their experiences and minimises the control, coercion and abuse they may have experienced.

The recruitment of these victims follows a familiar pattern to other forms of child exploitation. They are **targeted** by perpetrators and then **groomed**, often through promises of payment or gifts (such as online gaming credits or skins), they may be **tested** through small transactions and are eventually **trapped** in debt bondage and potential poverty through funds being confiscated and accounts shut down. Exploiters will then capitalise on this and use the situation to coerce the child into other forms of exploitation.

What should be done?

Using appropriate language can help professionals to reframe the issue from one of fraud, criminality, and choice, to one of exploitation and abuse. This shift encourages appropriate safeguarding interventions which lead to improved support and outcomes for children.

Inappropriate Term

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.

They need to take responsibility for their behaviour

It may feel as though a young person is making choices and poor decisions, but no young person is responsible for their own exploitation. Exploiters use manipulation and grooming to coerce young people into criminal or sexual activity. The only person responsible is the exploiter.

Suggested Alternatives

- The child is being sexually/criminally exploited and is a victim of human trafficking.
- The child is being sexually/criminally exploited through drug debt.
- The perpetrator is using debt bondage to continue to control and exploit the child.
- 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.

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

Inappropriate Term

Suggested Alternatives

They are involved in a gang/ they are involved in criminality

These phrases imply that the young person is choosing to do this. The use of the term 'gangs' minimises the violence caused to young people in the context of organised crime and youth violence. It also inherently implies choice.

There are also potential racist connotations associated with society's negative image of a gang and who gang members are which can further stigmatise non-white individuals and communities.

- They are being criminally exploited, likely by Organised Crime Groups.
- They are being groomed or at risk of being exploited by perpetrators/Organised Crime Groups.
- They are a victim of human trafficking and/or modern slavery and are being exploited to commit criminal offences.

They are being used as a "gift girl"/ "uck girl"/ "sendout" for an OCG

These are slang terms used to describe Organised Crime Groups grooming young women and girls with alcohol and drugs and trafficking them to a trap house for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

When phrases such as "gift girl" or others are repeated, it minimises violence against women and girls within the county lines context. Minimising the violence by using terms like this is an established control measure of perpetrators of violence against women and girls. This phrase also reinforces the dehumanising idea that humans can be bought, sold, or given as gifts. It is therefore vital that as professionals we use the correct terms to describe the abuse that a child is subjected to.

As professionals we need to make sure we continue to challenge any further derogatory terms that may arise.

- They are being trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation.
- They are being sexually exploited in a county lines context.
- They have been kidnapped, trafficked, raped, exploited, and abused.

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Reframing the term 'plugging' to 'children being forced or coerced to carry drugs internally' and recognising the practice as sexual abuse

Criminally exploited children may be forced to carry drugs internally to avoid detection. This practice involves packages of drugs being inserted into a child's body, commonly the rectum or vagina alongside oral ingestion. Organised Crime Groups involved in county lines operations use this as a method to move drugs from one place to another, concealing the drugs in children they are trafficking. This is often referred to as 'plugging', 'bottling', or 'banking' by a range of agencies.

Why is it a problem?

These are slang terms which do not reflect the reality of what is happening to a child and when used, minimises the abuse that a child has experienced. By using slang terms that perpetrators of this abuse may also use, professionals' risk negatively reinforcing the narrative of choice and blame.

The Children's Society sees the practice of children being forced or coerced to carry drugs rectally or vaginally as sexual abuse and feel it should be named as such.

We recognise that current legislation does not support prosecuting the practice as sexual abuse as the Sexual Offences Act 2003 requires evidence of a 'sexual motive' or of 'sexual gratification'. However, this legislation was developed at a time when the practice of coerced internal concealment was far less known.

The reality:

The child is being penetrated (this penetration is either carried out directly by adults or other children or under their direction and control), with substances that pose a significant physical health risk should the package rupture, including the risk of death.

This penetration involves the violation of a child's sexual organs and is an inherently traumatic experience for the child. It is a physical violation that has a strong likelihood of long-lasting negative impact on a child's emotional and mental health and can leave the child feeling significant shame and humiliation.

What should be done?

Using appropriate language can help professionals to reframe the issue from one of choice, to one of exploitation and abuse. By clearly describing the act of children being forced or coerced to carry drugs internally and labelling it as a sexual abuse issue, victims are more likely to receive appropriate safeguarding and health interventions which lead to improved support and outcomes for children.

We recognise that a child or vulnerable adult can be made to conceal other items inside their body. To be inclusive of all forms of concealment, we suggest using the term 'forced or coerced internal concealment' as an alternative.

Inappropriate Term

Dehumanising terms such as: Cuckooing/Juvenile/Nominal

Terms such as these can be useful in identifying the situation a young person is in, though they could be seen as dehumanising terms which minimise the seriousness of the situation the young person is in.

Though these terms are recognised by professionals, they can remove the perception that they are a child under the age of 18 who may be being exploited and abused, who needs to be safeguarded from harm.

Suggested Alternatives

- They may be being trafficked for the purposes of sexual or criminal exploitation.
- They may be being sexually exploited within the county lines context.
- They are being considered a perpetrator though the offences they committed were as a result of them being a victim of modern slavery.
- Their house/accommodation has been invaded by organised crime groups.
- The child has been coerced to conceal drugs inside their body.

They will not engage with services

A young person's previous experience of engaging with services may impact their perceptions of the support they are going to receive from a service.

Young people may be expected to speak to lots of professionals, and impacts of funding, capacity, staff transitions can mean that a young person feels they won't be supported. It is important to recognise the factors creating difficulty for services to engage the young person.

- Due to the trauma they have experienced because of their exploitation, the child finds it difficult to trust unknown adults.
- Services have not yet found the best way to build relationships with them.
- Support was offered that did not meet the needs of the young person at that time.
- It is recommended that the services try an alternative approach to engaging the child.

Inappropriate Term

Suggested Alternatives

Young person is vulnerable

There are some specific terms that can help identify heightened vulnerability to exploitation, however it is the situation surrounding the young person rather than the young person themselves that is the cause of this vulnerability. Being specific about these environmental factors and vulnerabilities can be helpful to not only take any responsibility away from the young person but also to help design multi-agency interventions – for example, the young person and their family is living in acute poverty and this creates a vulnerable situation to exploitation.

- The young person could be in a vulnerable situation.
- Their environment or situation could put them at risk of exploitation
- The young person could be impacted by the situation surrounding them.
- The contexts or environments the young person is in could make them vulnerable to exploitation.