



**Dudley Safeguarding  
People Partnership**

**Language Matters:  
Guidance for professionals around  
the use of language when  
discussing and recording work with  
exploitation**

## **About appropriate language in relation to Child Sexual and/or Criminal Exploitation**

It is imperative that appropriate terminology is used when discussing individuals who have been exploited or are at risk of exploitation. Language implying that the 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 people have in abusive or exploitative situations and must recognise the severity of the impact exploitation has on the person.

Victim-blaming language may reinforce messages from perpetrators around shame and guilt. This in turn may prevent the 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 person's experience, resulting in a lack of appropriate response.

Victim blaming language in record keeping could prevent cases going to the court, or be used against the victims by the defence, for example; if a professional records that a 13 year old is in a relationship with a 24 year old boyfriend this could be used by the defence to claim the relationship was a loving one; as in 2012 when a lawyer stood up in court and in defence of his male client said the child "had loved him" and he had been "pleasant to her" and it had been "a consensual relationship"; a message both damaging and dangerous but one that could be claimed to be supported by recordings that did not reflect the grooming and abuse suffered by the 13 year old girl.

### **How to use this document**

This document can be used by professionals when discussing the exploitation of individuals, including when escalating intelligence and delivering training. The document can be read at the beginning of strategy meetings, multi-agency meetings, or other settings where professionals might be discussing individuals who are at risk of exploitation. This document can also be used as a guide to support appropriate use of language when making a written record.

### **Guidance for using appropriate language**

The following table outlines terms that should not be used when discussing or recording issues of exploitation and includes a list of appropriate alternative phrases. It is also important to use Plain English, avoid the excessive use of jargon and be sensitive to needs of different community cultures. Professional judgement will need to be used when considering how to record information for individuals; this document is to be used as guidance to help inform a final professional decision.

<u>Judgmental Language</u>	<u>Suggested Alternative</u>
<p><b>Putting themselves at risk.</b></p> <p><i>This implies the person is responsible for the risks presented by the perpetrator and that they can make free and informed choices.</i></p>	<p>Describe the risks being presented by the perpetrator and/or situation, considering the presence of coercion and control.</p> <p><b><u>Examples:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person may have been groomed.</li> <li>• The person is at an increased vulnerability of being abused and / or exploited.</li> <li>• A perpetrator may exploit the person's increased vulnerability.</li> <li>• The person is not in a protective environment.</li> <li>• The situation reduces the person's safety.</li> <li>• The location is dangerous to people.</li> <li>• The location / situation could increase the opportunity to abuse them.</li> <li>• It is unclear whether the person is under duress to go missing.</li> <li>• There are concerns that the person may be being sexually abused / exploited.</li> <li>• It is unclear why the person is getting into cars. There are concerns that there is a power imbalance forcing the person to act in this way.</li> <li>• There are concerns regarding other influences on the person.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Would not cooperate with... Did / Would not engage with services.</b></p> <p><i>This lays blame with the individual.</i></p>	<p>Think about the reasons why services have been unable to engage the person.</p> <p><b><u>Examples:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person did not feel safe enough to disclose.</li> <li>• The person appears to fear negative repercussions for disclosure/ engagement.</li> <li>• The person is being criminally / sexually exploited and / or groomed and therefore is not able to disclose/ engage.</li> <li>• The person considers the relationship to be consensual however the relationship has been formed in the context of exploitation.</li> <li>• Services were unable to engage with the individual.</li> <li>• Services are located in an area the person does not feel safe visiting</li> </ul>

<u>Judgmental Language</u>	<u>Suggested Alternative</u>
<p><b>Missing...</b></p> <p><b>Running away.</b></p> <p><i>This implies choice.</i></p>	<p>Think about the facts of the person's situation giving consideration to the likelihood of coercion and control being a factor.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person's safety is context driven.</li> <li>• The person does not feel able to stay at their current location.</li> <li>• The person is being groomed / coerced to leave.</li> <li>• The person may consider leaving to be the safest option in this circumstance.</li> <li>• Someone else has control over this person's behaviour.</li> <li>• The person has returned to a safe place.</li> <li>• The person is under duress to stay out.</li> <li>• The person is prevented from returning home.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Sexual activity with...</b></p> <p><i>This implies consensual sexual activity has taken place. If it occurs within an abusive or exploitative context this term is not appropriate.</i></p> <p><b>Having a relationship with an adult of concern.</b></p> <p><i>This implies choice.</i></p>	<p>Think about the facts of the person's situation giving consideration to the likelihood of coercion and control being a factor.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person has been sexually abused.</li> <li>• The person has been raped.</li> <li>• There are reports of sexual abuse.</li> <li>• The person has described sexual activity, however concerns exist that the person may have been groomed and / or coerced.</li> <li>• The person is being coerced / exploited by an adult of concern.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Sexually active since [age under 13].</b></p> <p><i>A person under 13 cannot consent to sex and is therefore being abused. This should be reflected in the language used.</i></p>	<p>Language should reflect the abusive nature of the situation, this is not a consensual sexual relationship</p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person has been raped.</li> <li>• The person has been / may have been sexually abused.</li> <li>• Concerns exist that the person may have been coerced, exploited or sexually abused.</li> </ul>

<u>Judgmental Language</u>	<u>Suggested Alternative</u>
<p><b>In a relationship with...</b></p> <p><i>This implies that the person is in a consensual relationship and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context.</i></p>	<p>Think about the facts of the person's situation giving consideration to the likelihood of coercion and control being a factor.</p> <p><b><u>Examples:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The 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.</li> <li>• The person has been / is being groomed, exploited, and controlled.</li> <li>• The person is being coerced / exploited by an adult of concern.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Promiscuous.</b></p> <p><i>This implies consensual sexual activity has taken place. Promiscuous is a judgmental term which stereotypes and labels people. It isn't appropriate in any context when discussing people, but particularly if it occurs within an abusive or exploitative context.</i></p>	<p>Use factual information to describe what is happening, noting the likelihood of coercion and control from adults posing a risk.</p> <p><b><u>Examples:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person is vulnerable to being sexually abused.</li> <li>• The person is being sexually exploited.</li> <li>• The person has been / is being coerced into sharing images of themselves online.</li> <li>• The person is being coerced / exploited by an adult of concern.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Prostituting themselves.</b></p> <p><i>This implies that the 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.</i></p>	<p>Use factual information to describe what is happening, noting the likelihood of coercion and control from adults posing a risk.</p> <p><b><u>Examples:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person is vulnerable to being sexually abused.</li> <li>• The person is being sexually exploited.</li> <li>• The person is being coerced / exploited by an adult of concern.</li> </ul>

<u>Judgmental Language</u>	<u>Suggested Alternative</u>
<p><b>Boyfriend / Girlfriend.</b></p> <p><i>This implies that the person is in a consensual relationship and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context. People have been challenged in court with practitioner's recordings where a practitioner has referred to the perpetrator as the person's boyfriend or girlfriend.</i></p>	<p>Think about the abusive and/or exploitative context. Are there concerns that this is not a consensual relationship?</p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The 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.</li> <li>• The person has been / is being groomed, exploited and controlled.</li> <li>• The person is being coerced / exploited by an adult of concern.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Has been contacting adult males / females via phone or internet.</b></p> <p><b>Using the internet to meet adults who pose a risk.</b></p> <p><b>Sending or receiving indecent images.</b></p> <p><i>This implies that the person is responsible for the communication and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context.</i></p>	<p>Think about where the responsibility lies for actions taken online – who is contacting who? Is there evidence of grooming or coercion?</p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adult males / females have been contacting the person.</li> <li>• The person may have been groomed.</li> <li>• There are concerns that the adult is facilitating communication with the person.</li> <li>• The person is vulnerable to online perpetrators.</li> <li>• There are concerns that others may be using online technology to access or abuse the person.</li> <li>• Adults appear to be using a range of methods to communicate with the person.</li> <li>• The person is being targeted online by adults seeking to exploit.</li> <li>• The person is being coerced into sending / receiving / distributing indecent images.</li> </ul>

<u>Judgmental Language</u>	<u>Suggested Alternative</u>
<p><b>Offering him / her drugs seemingly in return for sex or to run drugs.</b></p> <p><i>This implies that the 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 relating to substance use.</i></p> <p><b>Dealing drugs / Stealing / Committing crimes.</b></p> <p><i>This blames the individual and does not acknowledge coercion.</i></p>	<p>Think about where the power lies in these interactions; is there coercion / threats / exploitation of vulnerability resulting from substance use?</p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person is being sexually / criminally exploited.</li> <li>• The person is being criminally exploited through drug debt.</li> <li>• There are concerns that the person has been raped.</li> <li>• Perpetrators are sexually abusing the person.</li> <li>• The person is being sexually abused.</li> <li>• The person's vulnerability regarding drug use is being used by others to abuse them.</li> <li>• The perpetrators have a hold over the person by the fact that they have a drug dependency.</li> <li>• The person appears to be acting on behalf of an individual or group in a criminal capacity.</li> <li>• The person is being forced into criminality.</li> <li>• The person is a victim of criminal exploitation</li> </ul>
<p><b>Involved in CSE.</b></p> <p><i>This implies that there is a level of choice regarding the person being abused. A five-year-old would never be referred to as being involved in sexual abuse for the same reasons.</i></p>	<p>Think about who is doing the exploiting; who holds the power and control in the situation?</p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person is vulnerable to being sexually exploited.</li> <li>• The person is being sexually exploited.</li> </ul>

<u>Judgmental Language</u>	<u>Suggested Alternative</u>
<p><b>Drug running – He / She is drug running. Dealing drugs / stealing / committing crimes.</b></p> <p><i>This implies that the 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.</i></p>	<p>Think about whether the person is choosing to commit crimes or is being threatened / coerced into actions of a criminal nature.</p> <p><b><u>Examples:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person is being criminally exploited.</li> <li>• The person is being trafficked for purpose of criminal exploitation.</li> <li>• The person appears to be acting on behalf of an individual or group in a criminal capacity.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Recruit / Run / Work.</b></p> <p><i>This implies that the 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 of the behaviour.</i></p>	<p>Think about whether the person is making a free choice to do what they are doing. Can their actions really be called work?</p> <p><b><u>Examples:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person is being criminally exploited.</li> </ul>
<p><b>He / She is choosing this lifestyle.</b></p> <p><i>This implies that the 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.</i></p>	<p>Is it really autonomy if you didn't choose the situation but have had to adapt to survive? What if you have been told that you aren't worth anything different? Think about the <a href="#"><u>social model of consent</u></a></p> <p><b><u>Examples:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person is being criminally exploited.</li> <li>• The person is being sexually exploited.</li> <li>• The person is too frightened to consider alternatives</li> <li>• The person does not feel safe to leave their abuser(s)</li> <li>• There are constraints affecting the person's freedom to make a choice</li> </ul>

<u>Judgmental Language</u>	<u>Suggested Alternative</u>
<p><b>Associating or spending time with...</b></p> <p><i>This implies that the 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.</i></p>	<p>Think about the balance of power, who is deciding when the “associations” take place and who with? Is there evidence of coercion?</p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person says that they are friends with a person or group of people and there are concerns about the ages of those people, the imbalance of power, exploitation and / or offending.</li> <li>• The person has been groomed, exploited, coerced and / or controlled.</li> </ul> <p><i>Note: If the person they are associating or spending time with is under 18 years old this will need to be considered using language of vulnerability / exploitation and also requires a child protection process / response.</i></p>
<p><b>Drug addict / Alcoholic.</b></p> <p><i>These labels have negative connotations and could impact on how the individual is viewed by professionals.</i></p>	<p>Describe the difficulties being experienced and why there is concern from others.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person has a drug or alcohol dependency that could be exploited.</li> </ul>

<u>Judgmental Language</u>	<u>Suggested Alternative</u>
<p><b>Gang involved or affiliated.</b></p> <p><i>This implies that the 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 or powerful grooming process.</i></p> <p><b>Gang member.</b></p> <p><i>This implies choice when in likelihood there has been threats and coercion.</i></p>	<p>Is there evidence of grooming or threats? How does the person describe their role in the gang?</p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person is being criminally / sexually exploited.</li> <li>• Violence and crime affected the person, their family or household.</li> <li>• There may be harmful behaviours and / or attitudes that exist towards violence and criminality within this peer network.</li> <li>• It is unclear why the person is getting into cars. There are concerns that there is a power imbalance and powerful grooming forcing or compelling the person to act in this way.</li> <li>• There are concerns regarding other influences on the person.</li> <li>• The person is being exploited within gangs.</li> </ul> <p><i>Note: If other members of the peer network are under the age of 18 years old, this will need to be considered using language of vulnerability / exploitation and also requires a child protection process / response.</i></p>
<p><b>Complex needs.</b></p> <p><i>This can be stigmatising for the person and create barriers.</i></p>	<p>Describe the complexity using factual information, what are the experiences the person has had / is having and how do they interact to exacerbate disadvantage?</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person is experiencing multiple disadvantages.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Unwilling to share information.</b></p> <p><i>This places blame on the person.</i></p>	<p>Has the person suggested why they cannot share information? Are they frightened / unsure of professionals / being threatened?</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person feels / appears unable to share information.</li> </ul>

<u>Judgmental Language</u>	<u>Suggested Alternative</u>
<p><b>Running county lines.</b></p> <p><i>This implies that the 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.</i></p>	<p>Think about whether the person is choosing to do this or is being threatened / coerced into actions of a criminal nature.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person in this location may be being trafficked and sexually / criminally exploited.</li> <li>• There may be harmful behaviours and / or attitudes that exist towards violence and criminality within this area.</li> <li>• The environment may not be safe for the person.</li> <li>• The location / situation could increase the opportunity to abuse the person.</li> <li>• The person feels under threat / coerced to remain in this location and / or the grooming process is so powerful that the person believes this to be their choice.</li> <li>• The person does not feel safe enough to leave this location.</li> </ul> <p><u>Note:</u> County lines?</p> <p><i>Is he / she exploited through county lines? This should always be framed as a question where there is not an established link between county border locations or phone / social media 'lines' for the purpose of dealing / supply.</i></p> <p><i>There is a danger that broad use of the term 'county lines' may distract practitioners from identifying and responding to people being groomed, trafficked and exploited for the purpose of local drug dealing or supply.</i></p>
<p><b>Vulnerable person.</b></p> <p><i>Labelling groups of people as inherently 'vulnerable' is seen to be disempowering.</i></p>	<p>Describe the experiences of the person that you are concerned could be exploited.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person is at risk.</li> <li>• The person has care and support needs</li> </ul> <p>This is compliant with the Care Act.</p>

<u>Judgmental Language</u>	<u>Suggested Alternative</u>
<p><b>Gang(s) in the area / location.</b></p> <p><i>This implies that the 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 or their right to be in the location without experiencing harm.</i></p>	<p>Describe the environment, what is happening in this location and the reasons for concern</p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The area has been impacted by episodes of serious youth violence.</li> <li>• Groups of people congregate to create safety for themselves.</li> <li>• There may be harmful behaviours and / or attitudes that exist towards violence and criminality within this space / community / neighbourhood.</li> <li>• The space / community or neighbourhood may not be safe for this person or group of people.</li> <li>• There appears to be limited safe opportunities for people to interrupt harmful behaviours and / or attitudes that exist towards violence and criminality within this community / neighbourhood.</li> <li>• Owing to conflict and tensions between these groups, other areas or locations in the borough may not be safe for this person or group of people.</li> <li>• The location / situation could increase the opportunity to abuse vulnerable people.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Despite the risk he / she continues to return to the location.</b></p> <p><i>This implies that the person is responsible for any exploitation they experience in a location. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context or their right to be in the location without experiencing harm.</i></p>	<p>Think about the reasons the person is found on an area of concern, are they making a free choice to be there or are there threats / coercion?</p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person has an existing peer network in this location.</li> <li>• The person has ownership or investment in the area.</li> <li>• The person considers themselves to be safe in this space / community / neighbourhood.</li> <li>• The person did not consider themselves safe where they were.</li> <li>• The person has been groomed or coerced into being in this neighbourhood / location.</li> <li>• The person does not feel that they have another safe place to go.</li> <li>• The location / situation could increase the opportunity to abuse the person.</li> <li>• The person feels under threat / coerced to remain in this location.</li> <li>• The person does not feel safe enough to leave this location.</li> </ul>

<u>Judgmental Language</u>	<u>Suggested Alternative</u>
<p><b>Chaotic lifestyle.</b></p> <p><i>This places blame on the person and characterises them as disorganised and suggests there is choice involved.</i></p>	<p>Describe what is happening to the person as part of the exploitation.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person has been moved around to different locations.</li> <li>• The person is being kept out overnight.</li> <li>• The person is being given drugs and / or alcohol.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Hostile.</b></p> <p><i>This implies the person is choosing to be antagonistic or uncooperative.</i></p>	<p>Describe what is happening to the person; recognise they are often unable to talk as they do not feel safe to do so.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person appears withdrawn and unable to talk.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Plugging</b></p> <p><i>Dismisses the context of sexual violence, coercion, humiliation, and exploitation the child has had to endure in the process of this act being committed</i></p>	<p>This is a common feature of county lines activity and a clear example of child sexual abuse. Describe what is happening to the person as part of the exploitation.</p>
<p><b>Cuckooing</b></p> <p><i>Does not consider the multifaceted nature of exploitation and that a home either theirs or others is being used to facilitate further forms of exploitation.</i></p>	<p>Children may be sent to another area of the country to live with a vulnerable adult whose home has been taken over by the gang in exchange for a continued supply of drugs.</p>
<p><b>Going Country</b></p> <p><i>Implies a voluntary action and diminishes the multifaceted coercion, grooming and exploitation that occurs</i></p>	<p>This is the most popular term that describes county lines activity. It can also mean the act of travelling to another city/town to deliver drugs or money.</p>

## Key points of reflection for practitioners

Practitioners should consider the following around language when working with children and young people subject to exploitation:

- Notice the language that is used to describe and talk about children and young people
- Be curious about why certain language is used and its impact on children and young people
- Avoid using language, jargon or acronyms which are poorly understood by children, young people and their parents/carers
- Use language preferred by the child or language that they are familiar with when speaking about their experiences to support them in developing a preferred narrative
- Be curious when a child or young person uses negative or problem saturated language to speak about themselves – where have they learnt this from?
- Avoid using language that places the problem in the child or young person
- Be mindful of differences in power and privilege between children and young people in contact with services and practitioners
- Remind ourselves and others the influential role practitioners and services play in shaping a child or young person's identity and experiences
- Support children and young people as Consultants on their own life experience and in how their life story is told and shared
- Challenge and deconstruct language that may be dehumanizing and enable others to reflect on the implications of this for children and young people
- Recognise that a young person's full life narrative will include diverse experiences where exploitation may be less present or not present at all – be inclusive of all these experiences
- Consider and interrogate whether your language and structures are anti-racist, anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory

## Key points and reflections for Services and Senior Leaders

- Do we provide regular supportive supervision and reflective practice to ensure practitioners are supported and enabled to attend to language within a safe, reflective and supportive environment?
- Are regular service audits and evaluations conducted to quality assure and explore what language is being used in paperwork?
- Is the training around safeguarding, child exploitation and any other mandatory training provided to practitioners inclusive and considerate of the role of language and its impact on children?
- Do service policies and strategies explicitly highlight the importance of attending to language and do they offer alternatives or signpost practitioners to relevant resources?
- Do senior leaders explicitly express a commitment to attending to language and encourage others to do so too?
- Are the service systems, processes and language anti-racist, anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory?
- Is the workforce diverse and representative of the children, young people, families and communities you work with?
- Is the workforce diverse enough to allow for diverse perspectives and discourses?

## **More Information**

For more information on exploitation in Dudley please visit the Dudley Safeguarding People Partnership website:

<https://dudleysafeguarding.org.uk/>



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