

Language

Language is about choosing what you say and write and how you say it. Language influences relationships with children and young people (child), families, and carers and how you work with them. It determines whose view of reality is accepted and the type of change you hope to create. The words you choose to write will shape the perception of every person who reads these words in years to come. For example, think about the differences between, “He’s always been a drug addict” and “James has struggled with substance use for a long time and has tried really hard to overcome his addiction.”

Key messages:

- The way you write about and talk with children, families and carers influences your relationship and how you work together.
- Choose your words wisely. They have the potential to partner, empower, support and build relationships with people. They also have the potential to make them feel scared, isolated, hopeless and confused.
- Think about the way you speak. Choose language that supports your purpose in keeping children safe with families or creating a sense of belonging with carers.
- Use language that helps people to participate fully.
- Use words that children, families and carers you are working with understand and that show you believe in them.
- Record your interactions holistically, with balance and objectivity. Use direct, unbiased language.
- Use language that holds people accountable for their behaviours, and makes it clear who is responsible.

Language is at the heart of your work with children, families and carers. The words you say help you to:

- give the child and family access to the information they need by using words that they understand, in order for them to be fully informed
- build relationships and show respect and fairness to children and their families
- give respect, knowing that how you speak and write about them will impact on how others view them, and how they view themselves

- make sure you are clear about behaviours and do not use labels to describe a person
- stay curious and attend to your own, or others', bias and assumptions
- be fair and balanced in decisions made about the child, family and carer
- be clear about who did what to whom and not inadvertently place blame on the victim or not hold a person using violence accountable
- support families to change to keep their kids safe
- support everyone to feel empowered to work in partnership for the safety and sense of belonging for the child
- help children, families and carers to feel heard, understood, supported, and motivated.

The way you talk to a child, connect with a parent, talk about a family to a carer, and record a child's story all set the tone of your practice. Words can also make people feel confused, scared, at fault, frustrated, hopeless or shamed. Words are powerful. They can demonstrate exclusion, distance, bias, judgement, emotion and power differentials.

‘Language is not neutral; it is loaded with meaning. It communicates to others how we as individuals, and as representatives of an organisation, interpret, evaluate, and make sense. Being aware of the language we choose and the way in which we use it can be critical in determining whose view of 'reality' we are accepting, what power relations we wish to reinforce, what kind of world we wish to adopt, and the type of social work we wish to create.’

- Hawkins, Fook & Ryan (2001)

Using jargon, too many words or complicated language can undermine your work with children, families and carers. It can also create a culture of 'us' and 'them'.

Purposeful and Clear Language

Tell families and carers what you are worried about and why, in a way they will understand. Hold people accountable for their behaviour and describe their worries respectfully. You need empathy, sensitivity, respect and care when talking to people

about your worries for their child, their biggest struggles, challenges, and strengths. You have a responsibility to use language that allows people to understand, participate fully and feel understood.

Language is Your Best Tool to Honour Dignity

Language can be ineffective when it minimises, hides or mutualises (makes both people responsible) for violence. It can take responsibility away from the person using violence and place it on the person being abused or violated. This can cause shame, blame and secrecy (Wade and Coates, 2004).

When used well, language can:

- uphold dignity
- help survivors notice their resistance
- make violence, and who used it against whom, clear.

Capturing a Child's Voice and Writing a Family's Story

The words you use to record a child's life, their experiences, their struggles and strengths become part of their history. Children have a right to read records that make sense of their experiences and explain the decisions made along the way.

The language you use to describe a child, their family and carer becomes their historical record. Others may use it to make decisions or the child might read it when they leave care. What would it feel like as a young adult reading their file if they always read that they are “difficult and uncooperative”? How will that affect how they view themselves? This version of their life holds power, it can be accepted by others without question. It provides an explanation about the ‘why’ in their lives and gives messages about connection, identity and sense of belonging.

Be confident to analyse conversations and meetings for the meaning behind them. Write and talk about the things that matter. Connect, engage and write with the intent of bearing witness to the experience of a child and their family. If you do this, you will look for and include things that matter to them, using words they understand.

Ensure accuracy and balance so their whole story is told. Do not write something that you would not say to them in person. Write the reason or the story behind events and decisions that affect their lives. For more information and for examples of how to use language to improve your practice, see: [Language: The Words We Use - Practice Tips](#) and [Dignity Driven Practice](#).

References

Coates, L., Wade, A. (2007). *Language and Violence: Analysis of Four Discursive Operations*. *Journal of Family Violence*, 22. 511-522.

Hawkins, L., Fook, J. & Ryan, M. (2001). *Social Workers Use of the Language of Social Justice*. *British Journal of Social Work*, 31:1, pg. 1-13.