

Language - The Words We Use Practice Tips

The way you communicate with and describe children, young people (child) and their families sets the tone for your work. The words you use in your casework with a family can affect the way you, your Permanency Support Program's (PSP) Service Provider, the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ), the Court and their community view a child and their family. If you use labelling or stigmatising language, you may unintentionally scare, isolate or confuse a child, family or carer rather than empower, support, partner and build relationships with them. For example, when you view a child and their family as difficult, helpless or hopeless, this may keep you and others closed off from understanding what is causing their problems or working towards change.

Listen differently to families and look at their story from different angles. Instead of saying 'they are resistant and unco-operative', a better way of phrasing this may be 'they are fearful given their past experiences?'

Keep the words you use simple and real. When exploring and describing a child's story with children and their families, it is good practice to:

- write and talk about their experiences and challenges in everyday language
- avoid jargon
- think about what you are trying to achieve, including the permanency goal you are working towards
- think about what motivates and empowers a child and their family to make changes.

Reflective Prompt:

Does what you do match what you say you do, or what you are trying to do?

What is it you are trying to say?

What is your intention when you speak, write or record (document)?

Avoid Jargon

In the PSP casework staff often use jargon with each other. This jargon shows the sector's values and priorities. Jargon can be confusing, stigmatising and labelling. It can reinforce power dynamics and leave the people we work with feeling confused, labelled and stigmatised. A more effective way to communicate with children and their families is using easily understandable everyday language instead. Below are some examples of jargon used in the PSP and more effective ways of communicating with families.

Disengaged/won't engage	Not currently having their needs met
Risk	Worry, worried about
(long-term) placement	A place (name of the child) stays
Permanency planning	Planning for the future
Home visit	Visited the home/talked to
Absconded	Left and returned to (provide explanation and contact)
Restoration	Has returned home returned to family
Supervised contact	Supported visit
Removal	Separation/taken from
Parenting capacity	Describe their skills/strengths and areas for improvement
Dirty urine	Positive drug test result
Client	Name of person
Files	Family's story

Accountability

“When you use language that ‘conceals the context of violence, resistance and responsibility’, you minimise the impact of these behaviours on families’ - Coates and Wades (2007)

So, by using language that makes clear who is responsible for safety and risk, you create a more accurate and detailed description of a child’s life and circumstances in the PSP. This will help you respond to this child’s situation more clearly. It is easy to mutualise responsibility. However, using language that holds the perpetrator accountable for their violence, helps you make a perpetrator’s actions visible.

Mutualisation means that a responsibility is ‘mutual’ or equal between two people, instead of holding one person responsible for their actions.

The examples below show you the difference between mutualising and accountable language.

Mutualising language	Accountable language
Mary is in a domestic violence relationship. There was an incident of domestic violence between John and Mary.	John and Mary are in a relationship where John is violent and abusive to Mary. John punched Mary in the face and kicked her in the stomach during an argument.
Chelsea (aged 14) is promiscuous and prostituting herself.	Chelsea is 14 years old. She is being exploited and sexually abused by men who are giving her money to have sex. This is sexual assault.

Using Language That Honours Dignity

Upholding the dignity of a child, their family and community is done by using specific language and understanding what might be happening for a child you are working with. Think about and describe the response and resistance to abuse or neglect. It

reveals qualities, strengths and abilities that can help you work with a child and their family. It helps you to 'join the dots' so you can better understand their vulnerability and risk. Below are some examples of how to honour dignity using language.

Example 1

Q: 'What happened when Mum was drunk and yelling?'

A: 'She was swearing and throwing things. She threw the cup from the kitchen and it hit Jessie' (infant brother).

Q: 'Where were you when she did that?'

A: 'In the lounge room.'

Q: 'What did you do when that happened?'

A: 'I waited for Mum to go into the bedroom. I picked Jessie up and went to the neighbour.'

Caseworker: That was such a brave thing you did to keep Jessie safe.

Scenario 2

Q: 'What happened when Dad came home from the pub?'

A: 'He was swearing and throwing things. He yelled at Mum, then he hit her.'

Q: 'What did Mum do when Dad was swearing and throwing things and hit her?'

A: 'She ran and covered me with a blanket and took me to the bedroom. She locked the door and put the TV on loud so we couldn't hear him.'

Q: What happened then?

A: It went quiet after a while. Mum checked it was okay. Dad was gone. We went to auntie's house. I helped her get our clothes. I am staying with auntie now.'

Please see: [Dignity Driven Practice](#) for further information.

PSP casework staff have a responsibility to use language that allows children, their families and carers to understand and feel understood. This allows them to take part in supporting a child's safety and wellbeing. Parents and carers need casework staff to partner with them to support change.

References:

Coates, L., Wade, A. (2007). Language and Violence: Analysis of Four Discursive Operations. *Journal of Family Violence*, 22, 511-522. Doi: 10.1007/s10896-007-9082-2