WHY LANGUAGE MATTERS in CHILD EXPLOITATION

Safeguarding Partnership Board

Background: To understand the impact of language on children and young people, thought needs to be given to the role of power of language in shaping identity. The development of children and young people's identity and self-definition is shaped by experiences with others and how the child is perceived by others (Norton, 2016). "Language is a powerful tool for communication but sometimes the way that it is used in social care creates stigma and barriers for understanding. Language is power…" TACT (The Adolescent and Children's Trust) Simply, used wrongly, language can damage children/young people in exploitative situations further.

Why it matters: Victim-blaming language may reinforce messages from perpetrators around shame and guilt. This in turn may prevent the child or young 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 child's experience, resulting in a lack of appropriate response. Language implying that the child or young person is complicit in any way, or responsible for the crimes that have happened or may happen to them must be avoided

Questions to consider:
1) Do we provide regular supportive supervision and reflective practice to ensure practitioners are supported and enabled to attend to language?
2) Are regular service audits and evaluations conducted to quality assure and explore what language is being used in paperwork?
3) Is the training around safeguarding, child exploitation inclusive and considerate of the role of language and its impact on children?

7 MINUTE BRIEFING

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Information: Language should always reflect the presence of coercion and the lack of control young people have in abusive or exploitative situations and must recognise the severity of the impact exploitation has on the child or young person. Practitioners should consider the following around language when working with children and young people subject to exploitation:

1) Think about the language they and others use to describe and talk about child or young person - is it appropriate? Does it reflect the situation of the child?

Common Examples
Putting themselves at risk: This implies that the child is responsible for the risks presented by the perpetrator and that they can make free and informed choice
He/she is choosing this lifestyle: This implies that the child or y/p 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
More examples are available at TACT-Language-that-cares-2019_online.pdf (tactcare.org.uk) and Appropriate language: Child sexual and/or criminal exploitation guidance for professionals - Tackling Child Exploitation

6) Remind themselves about the influential role practitioners and services play in shaping a child or young person's identity and experiences
7) Support children and young people as consultants on their own life experience and in how their story is told and shared
8) Consider and interrogate whether your language and structures are anti-racist, anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory

2) Be curious about the language that is used. Does it correctly describe the impact on the child or young person?
3) Avoid using language, jargon or acronyms which are poorly understood by children, young people, and their parents/carers
4) Avoid using language that places the problem on the child or young person
5) Be mindful of differences in power between children and young people in contact with services and practitioners