

Good Language Guide

This guide sets out some key principles to support practitioners in their written communications -whether this is through case recording, report writing or communications to families. It should also be applied to our verbal communications.

1 Use clear language that everyone can understand

Good written communication is key to working effectively with families, children and other professionals. Clear language means writing for a wide audience in a way that everyone can understand. The words used shouldn't be academic or specific to certain professions.

- ✓ Use shorter sentences where possible.
- ✓ Use everyday words that everyone understands (no jargon) – the reader shouldn't need to look up words in a dictionary or a glossary of social work terms.
- ✓ Make sure your writing is clear, is explained in a way that would make sense to someone that doesn't have any knowledge about the case and that there is no room for misunderstanding.

Bear in mind that, in the future, the child you are helping may want to understand more about why they had involvement with children's services. They have a statutory right to request a copy of the documents in their file. If they read your assessment, case notes, plan or meeting notes would they understand what you were worried about, what was working well and what happened?

If you are working with people who's first language is not English, even if they speak good English, use simple words and avoid complex language, avoid turns of phrase or local words or sayings which are unlikely to be understood. For example words like 'lass' or 'lad' aren't formal language and won't be taught to anyone learning English.



Don't use Acronyms

We are all guilty of using acronyms at times, but please try your hardest not to – especially in documents we share with families or other professionals. They rarely make sense outside of our profession or organisation - most people won't have a clue what they mean. It's very confusing for families and their network.

Also consider that the same acronym could mean something totally different to a police officer or a teacher - this can lead to misunderstandings.

Avoid Professional Jargon

There are words and phrases that are specific to our profession or organisation and it's easy to forget that others don't understand what this means. Words like 'Strategy,' 'Section 20' 'Conference' or 'Section 17.' Professional language doesn't explain what you mean and if we use this in our conversations with families it's likely to create a barrier to good communication. Try and use language you would use if you were explaining your concerns to the child.

Remember you are in a position of authority, even though you will be building a good relationship with the family - some parents might not feel comfortable telling you they don't understand what you mean.

Avoid Professional Terminology

Terms like 'Neglect,' 'Domestic Abuse,' 'Mental Health Difficulties,' 'Challenging Behaviour' are just broad labels and they don't tell us exactly what has happened or the severity.

One person's interpretation of the term neglect is likely to be different to someone else's, depending on their previous experiences.

If you don't describe the exact behaviours that have led you to conclude that there is evidence of neglect or domestic abuse, others reading the case could significantly over or underestimate the severity of what has happened.

Remember, even if behaviours are explained properly in other parts of the case file, documents are often read in isolation.

Would your case recording provide the child with an accurate picture of what happened if they ask for their case file in the future? Or would it leave them making assumptions and drawing their own conclusions?

2 Capture the voice of everyone involved, especially the child

When you describe what people have told you, particularly if this is the voice of the child or something the family, network or professionals have said that is forming evidence within the assessment. Use their exact words where you can, rather than summarising this and giving it your own interpretation. Make this clear by stating who told you what and putting their words in speech marks.

"Never, ever, ever underestimate the power your words can have"

3 Always take a strength based and solution focused approach and make sure this comes through in your recording

Remember what you write is the lens through which others will see the child and the family. Language shapes our lens, our attitudes, expectations, beliefs, feelings, assumptions, perspectives and so much more. Language helps us to make sense of the world, our experiences and ourselves.

What we say to and about a child change how we think about them, and how they think about themselves, choose your words carefully, speak kindly.

Make sure your writing is strengths based and solution focused, so that strengths and safety are explained in relation to the worries.

“I’ve learnt that people will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel.” (Maya Angelou)

For example, when making placement requests for children identify their strengths and use positive language as well as describing any worries. Focusing purely on their high needs or challenges, is deficit focused and could reduce the likelihood of them finding a foster placement.

Care Leader a national organisation that challenges stereotypes about care leavers advocate that, as well as including all statutory information, care records should give a wider context to help care workers understand why incidents might’ve occurred. Some examples of this are below:

- Statutory information: Michael has low attendance at school and is disengaged with other pupils.
- Moral obligation: Michael has been to 11 primary schools and feels like he’s always losing friends.
- Statutory information: Michael has stolen his previous foster carer’s car in the night.
- Moral obligation: Michael felt frightened and alone about being in foster care and took his foster carer’s car to see his mum. He was shaken and deeply regrets his actions.

Language is impactful because it can restrict, cage, and reduce people to boxes and labels. It can also trigger, humiliate, and can push someone down a memory and trauma hole.

On a positive note:

- Language can lift, elevate, open doors, inspire, positively shape attitudes, expectations, beliefs and feelings.
- Language is free

4 Terms to Describe Important People

When referring to important people in the child’s life avoid generic terms like birth Mum, biological father, foster carers, grandmother. Refer to these people using the words the child uses e.g. Foster Mum or Auntie Yvonne, Nan, Mam, Dad.

Always use the child or young person’s name in all your writing do not refer to them as the child in care or care leaver.