

Language matters

Use of language in child sexual abuse & exploitation practice

2024 Review

Created by The Core Priority Programme for Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation



Welcome

This guide is for **anyone working in the field of child sexual abuse and exploitation**. Those working with children and families or those working in influencing, fundraising or communications. This document has been reviewed in 2022 and now 2024 by the CSA CPP in recognition of the pace of change in the field. It includes:

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- **What children tell us**
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- **Beckett’s interconnected conditions for exploitation**
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For the purpose of this document “Child/Children” will refer to all children and young people under the age of 18 years old.

Barnardo’s preferred term is “Black and Minoritised Ethnic” (communities). This can also be suffixed by the phrase ‘and other racially minoritised communities’. We expect colleagues to refer to specific communities and avoid homogenisation whenever possible.

Where possible it is important not to use acronyms as they may alienate audiences and cause misunderstanding.

Impact of language



The language we use to describe children and their experiences should:

- ✓ **Inspire** children.
- ✓ Evoke **hope** in a child.
- ✓ **Help** a child make sense of their identity.
- ✓ **Empower** children.
- ✓ Reflect their **identity**.

However, it can also:

- **Silence** a child who had something to tell.
- **Blame** a child for something they had no control over.
- **Oppress** a child who expresses themselves for who they are.
- **Shame** a child who was seeking help.
- **Influence** the level and quality of interventions offered to children.

Impact of language



Use language that:

- Adopts a **children's rights approach**.
- Encourages abuse and exploitation to be viewed through a **safeguarding lens**.
- Encourages a **child protection response**.
- **Avoids victim blaming**.
- Is **trauma informed**.

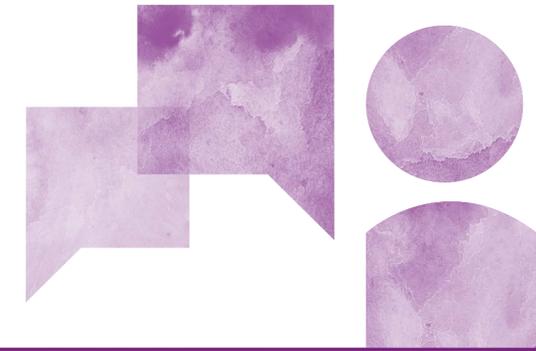
It is essential that we communicate **clearly and appropriately** when communicating about child abuse and exploitation. We have a responsibility to **actively challenge** inappropriate language, discourses, and narratives used by others.

Communication includes:

- What we say.
- How we act - our body language.
- What we write about children. For example, **assessments**, letters, meeting **minutes**, reports and **case notes**.

Ensure that we always consider **how we would feel** reading this about ourselves or our own children.

What children tell us



Those who have been subjected to abuse or exploitation tell us it is essential that the language we use is founded on strong principles of **respect, understanding of the context** in which abuse, and exploitation happened and isn't victim blaming. We need to ensure how we describe children is aligned with how they might describe themselves and their experiences.

“I have been called a criminal and difficult to deal with.”
(Child, Barnardo's and East Riding of Yorkshire Partnership)

“I have been called a survivor, and obviously I am alive but I didn't survive through it.” (Child, Barnardo's and East Riding of Yorkshire Partnership)

It is of paramount importance that children are viewed, protected and supported as victims of exploitation and not as culpable, deserving, or in any way responsible for their own abuse or exploitation.



Understanding child abuse and exploitation



All children can be vulnerable to abuse and exploitation

- Neither individual nor contextual vulnerabilities cause the exploitation and abuse of children. **Responsibility always lies with those who abuse and exploit children and cause them harm.**
- Abuse and exploitation occurs when those who **want to harm do so.**
- Sexual harassment and sexual harm is made up of many behaviours and what is considered harmful should be determined by those who have been harmed, not the act.
- Where children abuse other children the reasons and motives in these situations are complex.
- **Vulnerability is not the reason abuse and exploitation occurs** – it is only relevant because there is someone willing to abuse or exploit alongside inadequate protective structures to disrupt their behaviour.

Beckett's interconnected conditions for exploitation

(2011)



There are three conditions that need to be present if a child is to be abused/exploited

- ▶ **Source of harm** - Sources of harm include a person/network who has access to children, motivation, and mediums to cause harm.
- ▶ **Inadequate protective structures** - If protective structures are not present and able to be effectively mobilised to disrupt or stop sources of harm gaining access to children, children cannot be safeguarded.
- ▶ **Children** - By the very nature of being a child, all children are vulnerable to abuse/exploitation. Children have very limited power, or emotional or material resources to alter or control perpetrator behaviour.

Children cannot be expected to identify those who harm or to alter their behaviours. Safety intervention, support or management strategies, should not rely on educating children to change their behaviours, but on **adults intervening to protect children**.

It is important to also recognise that the contexts of harm are very important to consider alongside protective structures.



Some key terms:

Contextual safeguarding

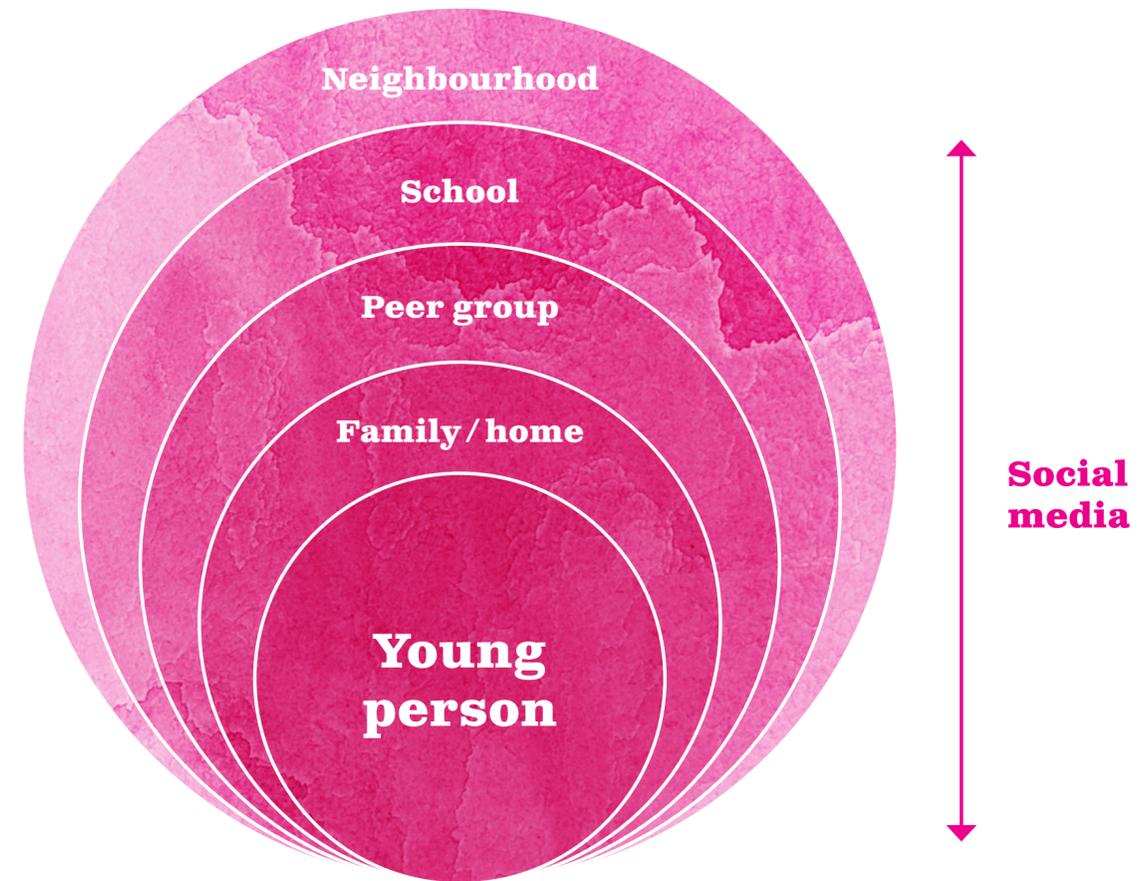


Key considerations

Contextual safeguarding is an approach and way of working in relation to understanding and responding to, young people's experiences of harm beyond their families and outside of the home. It recognizes that young people may be vulnerable to exploitation or harm not just within their homes but also in various contexts such as schools, neighbourhoods, and online spaces.

Contextual safeguarding aims to create a more holistic and effective approach to protecting young people from harm in a variety of settings.

More can be read about Contextual Safeguarding here [About us | Contextual Safeguarding](#)



What is victim blaming?



‘Victim blaming’ is defined as the transference of blame from the perpetrator of a crime to the victim

- **Victim blaming language** implies that a person who has been victimised is, in some way or form, complicit or responsible, for the harm they have been subjected to.
- First coined by **William Ryan in 1971** - the term ‘blaming the victim’ was used to argue that shifting blame towards Black people in the US was justifying racism and violence towards Black communities by white people in power.
- Victim blaming is common to many social problems.
- In our work with children, victim blaming language places responsibility on a child to change, rather than on the **abuser to stop harming a child.**
- It can be **hard to change language or terms**, that have been used for some time but ensuring appropriate use of language is a **vital step towards reducing victim blaming** of children.



Examples of victim blaming



Examples of victim blaming vary widely, from what a child was doing or saying, or not doing/saying, through to their family circumstances.

Some examples are:

- Using where a child was, what they were doing, or who they were with to make them feel responsible.
- How a child looks or behaves.
- Whether a child was under the influence of alcohol or drugs.
- Whether a child was sexually active.
- Whether a child reported their abuse or exploitation to police.
- Placing the responsibility on the child to keep themselves safe eg in risk assessments.
- Referring to a child's experiences of exploitation as a "lifestyle choice".

“I’ve heard people say I’m immature. I’ve heard people say I’ve got a negative attitude. I’ve heard people say that I’ve got bad, bad behaviour.” (Child, male, 13, Barnardo’s and East Riding of Yorkshire Partnership)

Parent / carer blaming



The conventional social care model sees abuse as occurring within the family setting and looks inwards towards the family for the causes and risks. The abuse or exploitation of children by people outside the home challenges these conventions. **Contextual Safeguarding** is an approach to support understanding, and responding to, young people's experiences of harm beyond their families.

“I’m sick of going to bed crying at night thinking my child’s not safe. Me and my partner say to each other all the time, how do we parent him? Or how do we keep our child safe? If we can’t keep him safe, who can keep him safe? They need to give more support for children and parents.”

(Parent, Barnardo’s and East Riding of Yorkshire Partnership)

Language used by professionals can blame parents and carers for the behaviours of those that harmed their child.

Some examples are:

- Children are described as **“beyond parental control”** rather than **“under the control of a person who harmed them”**.
- **“Strict parenting has led to them to rebel.”** - Exploitation cannot be attributed to any parenting styles or choices that prioritise children and their overall wellbeing and safety.
- **“Did not keep the child at home”** or **“They were not supervised on the internet”** - Unrealistic expectations are placed upon parents. Parents have legal responsibilities to safeguard their children, however, exploitation and harm outside the home often occurs despite parents doing all they can to protect their children.
- Parents should be seen by professionals as **partners in safeguarding their children**, recognising that professionals and parents / carers both want the child to be safe from harm.

Some key terms:

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)



Key considerations

Child Sexual Exploitation is Child Sexual Abuse.

Barnardo's definition is:

“Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.”

- The term child sexual exploitation is somewhat vague, and does not reflect the true harm, violence, or trauma children experience.
- The initial definition of CSE included a clause referring to children receiving something ‘in exchange’ for sexual exploitation, the term can still carry this connotation of ‘exchange’, implying that those who are subjected to sexual abuse/exploitation receive something in exchange for their abuse, and are therefore, to some extent, complicit in their own abuse.

Preferred approaches

- Use terms which are clear about the harm and crimes committed against children, which emphasise the presence of coercion/ coercive control, reflect the lack of control children have in abusive or exploitative situations, which emphasise the severity of the impact of abuse on children, and contain reference to the trauma a child experiences.
- Use clear and specific language, and detailed descriptions of contexts and characteristics of abuse.
- Focus on the activity of the person who has sexually harmed, in order to place responsibility with them.
- Avoid use of acronyms, which can be viewed as belittling experiences.

Preferred terms

- Child sexual abuse (CSA).
- Sexual abuse.
- Coerced, enticed, manipulated, forced into.
- Communicate specific characteristics of abuse through language such as: Groups of adults who used drugs to groom and control children to sexually abuse them.

Some key terms:

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)



Key considerations

Child Criminal Exploitation is Child Abuse.

In England, there is currently no statutory definition of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE). Barnardo's proposed statutory definition is:

“Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) is when a child under the age of 18 is encouraged, expected or required to take part in any activity that constitutes a criminal offence under British law.”

Where a child is criminally exploited there may also be the use of violence or fear of violence towards the child or their family. Use of violence or fear of violence does not need to be present for a child to be criminally exploited.

Children are often criminalised rather than being recognised as victims of exploitation. Children can commit criminal offences and be exploited – they are not mutually exclusive. It is important to consider that children may not recognise CCE as exploitation or abuse due to grooming.

Preferred approaches

- Use terms which are clear about the harm and crimes committed against children. Which emphasise the presence of coercion and coercive control, reflect the lack of control children have in abusive or exploitative situations and contain reference to the trauma a child experiences.
- Use clear and specific language, and detailed descriptions of contexts/ characteristics of abuse.
- Focus on the activity of the person who has harmed, in order to place responsibility with them.

Preferred terms

- Criminally exploited.
- Coerced.
- Manipulated.
- Forced into / Enforced.
- Communicate specific characteristics of abuse such as:

Groups of adults or organised crime gangs (OCG's) who used drugs as a way of engaging and controlling children to criminally exploiting them.

Some key terms:

County lines & concept of exchange



Key considerations

County lines is a **form of** criminal exploitation. It is when criminals befriend children, either online or offline, and manipulate them into drug dealing or an associated activity across geographical areas.

‘County Lines’ has become a widely known and used term. It is a criminal justice term, and focuses on the type of crime, rather than the exploitation of children, and levels of threat and coercive control they face.

Terms such as **exchange**, ‘reaping the rewards’, ‘living the dream’, receiving something in return frames exploitation and abuse as reciprocal.

Such terms **position the child as having choice and agency** to perform an exchange or in some way consenting to their abuse or exploitation.

No child consents to their own exploitation. Children subject to exploitation or abuse have limited choice and agency due to the power dynamics of exploitative and abusive contexts.

Preferred approaches

- Use terms which are clear about the harm and crimes committed against children, which emphasise the presence of coercion or coercive control, reflect the lack of control children have in abusive or exploitative situations.
- Use specific language – e.g. enforced selling of drugs.
- Use language which avoids framing exploitation and abuse as a form of exchange in which a child gets something they want or need, but which instead reflects the threats, coercion and manipulation they are exposed to.

Preferred terms

- Criminal exploitation.
- Enforced criminality.
- Trafficking of children.
- Children coerced by adults into selling drugs.
- Forced.
- Enticed.
- Coerced.

Some key terms:

Victim / survivor



Key considerations

Children who have been abused are victims of a criminal act. However, this term can in some cases stop children being seen as children, giving an impression that there is something wrong with them, that requires fixing.

The term has also been criticised for invoking a sense of pity, suggesting a weakness or helplessness that children may or may not identify with.

The term survivor, was developed by adults who had been subjected to childhood abuse and did not want to be labelled as victims. However, many adults who have been subjected to child sexual abuse challenge this term as inaccurate in relation to their journeys.

Labelling as a victim or survivor also encourages a focus on the individual rather than the experience, fails to look at the wider context of children's lives, making the abuse or exploitation they have been subjected to the 'most important' aspect of their lives.

Preferred approaches

- Be led by what people want to be referred to as – don't tell people they can't refer to themselves as one or the other, but don't assume they are ok with these terms.
- Use factual and descriptive terms which don't convey inaccurate and offensive messages.
- While it is ideal to avoid use of either term, where this cannot be avoided, it may be preferable to use both – e.g 'victims and survivors'.

Preferred terms

- Children who have been referred to.
- Those who use Barnardo's services.
- Children who have been criminally exploited.
- Children who have been sexually abused.
- When referring to adults: Adults who were subjected to abuse in childhood.

Some key terms:

Perpetrator



Key considerations

The term ‘perpetrator’ is contentious in that it results in a person being defined by one label/characteristic.

The terms of victim and perpetrator are criminal justice terms and carry moral positionings. The picture these words evoke in our language will filter what we hear and does not allow us fully understand peoples experiences independent of these categories. We recognise the legal use of these terms.

The label does not encapsulate the complexity of either offending or victimisation, which is important to understand if we are to stop child sexual abuse. Children have been described as perpetrators, where they have in fact been groomed to harm other children.

Perpetrator should never be used to describe a child.

Use of the word, ‘gang’ or ‘grooming gang’ holds racist connotations, these have been perpetuated by parts of the media and it is recognised that these terms further stigmatises African, Asian & Caribbean Heritage individuals and communities.

Preferred approaches

- Be ‘trauma informed’ - describe the behaviour of a person rather than the individual.
- Seek to understand the experiences that led to the behaviour.
- Groups or organised networks are defined by Barnardo’s as;

“Two or more individuals, whether identified or not, who are known to /or associated with one another. They can be loosely interconnected or more formally organised. Other children can be exploited by these adults to abuse other children through these networks.”

Preferred terms

- Person or people who have harmed or sexually harmed.
- Those who target or groom to sexually abuse or exploit.
- For **children** who have harmed sexually the preferred terms are: problematic and harmful sexual behaviour, the child who has harmed. Where they have been exploited into harming others, they are the victim of exploitation.

Some key terms:

Risk



Key considerations

Risk refers to something that has not yet started or happened - chance, potential, possibility, threat, likelihood. The risk of abuse always comes from those who harm.

When referring to risk in child abuse and exploitation, the term has not always been used correctly. Risk has been referred to as high, medium or low with many children having already experienced harm or continuing to experience harm. **The term 'risk' should not be used when harm has already occurred - use the term harm.**

A focusing on measuring the child's 'risk' can focus on the child's behaviour rather than the risk through the behaviour of those who harm.

This is victim blaming and leads to ineffective or punitive approaches focussing on changing the child and reducing their 'risk level', detracting from the fact that **responsibility for abuse always lies with those who harm.**

Preferred approaches

- Ensure language does not in any way detract from sources of harm.
- Avoid language suggesting a child increases or decreases their own risk; there would be no risk of abuse without abusers.
- Firmly place responsibility for abuse on those causing the harm, not children - this can be achieved by **emphasising the decisions and motivations of those that harm**, rather than focusing on a child.
- Risk Assessments are not suitable for children who are or have been harmed through exploitation, consider using terms such as needs assessment or support plan.



Some key terms:

Vulnerability



Key considerations

Vulnerability by definition means “easily hurt or attacked”.

In the instances of abuse and exploitation, vulnerability sits outside of the child or young person and the blame lies with those who exploit children, irrespective of a child’s history or circumstances.

As highlighted in the IICSA Report (2022) exploitation can happen to young people from all backgrounds, **all children are vulnerable to abuse** by nature of their age, power and status. It is the **responsibility of those around children to protect them** - any child can be vulnerable to abuse and exploitation if not protected and safeguarded by adults. However we do understand that some children may be more vulnerable than others. Therefore, we need to ensure adequate protective structures to safeguard these children.

“Although some young people may be more vulnerable - those who have experienced prior abuse, are homeless, are misusing alcohol and drugs, have a disability, are in care, are out of education, have run away/ gone missing from home or care.” (CSA Centre, 2021)

Preferred approaches

- Use language that recognises the adults that harm are responsible for abuse.
- When we talk about ‘vulnerabilities’, put this in the context of the systems around children rather than a child/ children themselves.
- Use language that avoids suggestions or assumptions that children can control their own vulnerability to abuse.

Some key terms:

Risky choices / risky behaviour



Key considerations

This language is victim blaming.

These kind of terms frame children as having some level of choice or agency to take risks and have knowledge in an exploitative or abusive situation. **Abusive situations undermine choice and agency.**

When safety is presented in a way that focuses on a child's behaviour, decision making or actions leading up to abuse or exploitation, responsibility is located with them, leading to children being viewed as both the problem and solution to their abuse or exploitation. This transfers blame away from the source of the abuse or exploitation to the victim, and **can encourage children to self-blame, feel shame and guilt.**

Those who harm or sexually harm must be framed as the risk - abuse is always the responsibility of those who harm.

Preferred approaches

- Focus on describing the activity of those who harm to place responsibility with them. For example, The person who harms uses alcohol to disinhibit the child as part of their grooming behaviour. They target certain places where they know the child will be.
- Use language which conveys the fact that abusive and exploitative situations undermine choice and agency.
- The names of our services should be carefully considered with this language in mind and names should be codesigned with children and families.



Some key terms:

Disengaged / hard to reach



Key considerations

These terms are often used to describe children who are not accessing services or engaging with professionals.

These terms suggest that it is **the responsibility of the child to be able to engage with services, rather than the responsibility on the practitioner to be able to engage that child and the service to be responsive to all children's needs**. How, or if, a child is able to engage may relate to trauma, child's lived experience, previous experiences of services or a lack of trust. This is further impacted by a child's, gender, age ethnicity or any other protected characteristic.

It is our responsibility to ensure our services have **equity of access** and that children and families are aware of this. We need to consider the impact of the tools and processes and consider the children we want to engage through an **intersectional lens**.

It is also important to consider existing research and evidence that indicates it is when **children feel safe, valued and included they are able to access services effectively**.

Preferred approaches

Use terms which identify successful engagement of children as the responsibility of professionals and service providers.

Holistic and strengths-based approaches are more inclusive and aligned to intersectionality.

When offering support to a young person consider:

- Environment – can support be available in children's own communities and safe spaces.
- Body positioning / Language / Self- awareness.
- Listen for, and reflect, underlying needs and acknowledge strengths.
- Do not use professional jargon.
- Treat young people as partners.

Preferred terms

- Children who services find it hard to identify / engage / access.
- Children who professionals find it hard to make services available to.

Some key terms:

Prevention



Key considerations

The word prevention can sometimes be used in the context of placing responsibility with children for stopping exploitation or abuse. For example, where aiming to prevent abuse is based on educating a child about exploitation, how to make 'safer choices' or teaching them not to take risks. These approaches **ignore the power dynamics in society and those created by those that harm.**

The term prevention should only refer to interventions that educate children that run alongside work to stop those that harm from abusing and exploiting children. This includes improving the systems and protective structures to stop abuse taking place.

It is unethical and ineffective to educate children about the concepts of exploitation and abuse **with an expectation for them to then protect themselves.** It is the responsibility of adults to prevent children being exploited.

Age appropriate work to educate children about child sexual abuse and exploitation **is important for all children** as part of their relationships and sex education (RSE). This approach can only be effective when it is combined with work to prevent those who harm and readily available early intervention. We as professionals and society need to **reduce the stigma around CSA/E and support families and professionals to have difficult conversations.**

Preferred approaches

- The term prevention should only refer to **interventions that stop those that harm from abusing** and exploiting children. That could include improving the systems and protective structures to stop abuse taking place.
- Ensure **education and awareness raising** is not considered as an intervention or support package but **rather a right for all children.** Receiving Relationship and Sexual Health Education (RSE) does not however mean that children are then responsible from protecting themselves from abuse and exploitation.
- Education for children about relationships, consent and abusive relationships is important for all children. However, this is not preventative work. This should always be trauma responsive and place responsibility with those that harm children.



Some key terms:

Associating with / in a relationship with



Key considerations

Suggesting a child is in ‘a relationship with’, ‘spending time with’, or ‘associating with’ the person who is causing harm, implies a consensual relationship / friendship. This does not reflect abusive or exploitative contexts.

Using language like this can serve to position the child as both the source of the problem and the source of the solution, normalise abusive and exploitative contexts and serve as a barrier to children recognising their situation as abusive or exploitative.

Preferred approaches

- Talk about ‘contexts’ and ‘situations’ as opposed to ‘relationships’.
- Use language that portrays and emphasises the abusive and exploitative nature of the context.

Preferred terms

- Child is being abused / groomed / coerced / manipulated / controlled by...
- Being exploited by...

Some key terms:

Gang / gang member / gang association



Key considerations

There is ongoing debate surrounding the language that is used to describe 'gangs' or groups of children. There is no common understanding or legal definition of a 'gang', or how they differ from 'groups'. Terms are often used in the context of anti-social behaviour, violence, crime and drug supply. There is an over-generalisation that children in groups are in gangs.

Research has found that peer groups of children are being labelled 'gang members', and discussed in terms of 'gang association', when in reality they are in peer friendship groups.

The term 'gang' in the main has **negative connotations**, brings bias, assumptions and fails to recognise the exploitation that takes place. It leads **professionals to assume children have choice and agency in joining a 'gang'**.

There are links to the rising levels of violence linked to knife crime. The **narrative insinuates blame on children rather than those who groom and exploit them**. We need to take a safeguarding lens. Public debate around gangs and youth violence are often projected through the lens of race and inequality.

Preferred approaches

- Describe specifics of situations.
- Consider looking at young people and their peer groups with an intersectional and contextualised lens.

Preferred terms

- If referring to a child and their peer **friendship group**.
- If referring to **criminal networks exploiting children**, be explicit about this.
- **Children affected by community violence** is a preferred term than serious youth violence. The recognises the impact on the harmed person, those who harm and those that witness violence including children in communities.

Some key terms:

Child Sexual Abuse Materials (CSAM)



Key considerations

The term 'child pornography' implies that a child is complicit in their sexual abuse.

This term detracts from the fact that these images are depicting a crime and should not be used.

Sharing images with adults

Key considerations

This language focuses on the actions and behaviour of a child. This removes the focus from the role of the adult and implies the child is responsible for the communication.

Such language and terminology does not reflect the abusive and exploitative context or place the person who harmed at the centre of the exploitation and abuse.

Preferred approaches

- Using the term 'child sexual abuse images' more accurately reflects what the images are.

Preferred approaches

- Use language that focuses on the actions of the person who harmed and positions a child as the victim of that harm.

Preferred terms

- Child sexual abuse materials (CSAM) or images.

Preferred terms

- Adults have been contacting the child.
- The child is being groomed.
- An adult is targeting / facilitating contact with a child.
- Adults are using online technology to access / abuse / exploit the child.

Some key terms:

Technology Assisted Child Sexual Abuse (TA-CSA)



Key considerations

The term Technology Assisted child sexual abuse (TA-CSA) is a term that has been coined to encompass all forms of child sexual abuse in which technology has been used to initiate, escalate and maintain abuse by those who harm or have harmed.

Technology Assisted Child Sexual Abuse is a rapidly evolving field. It is important we stay updated on current trends, technologies, and prevention strategies to provide accurate and relevant information and ensure we continuously use the correct language and terminology.

Preferred terms

- We recognise thought leaders in this field such as the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) and look to ensure we are accessing their most up to date resources and learning when working in this field, to ensure we are up to date with a every changing landscape.

Some key terms:

Grooming



Key considerations

Although 'grooming' is a term regularly used, its connotations need to be considered.

Grooming should not be described as a linear process, grooming does not always conform to a linear process, it can take different forms, be phased or gradual and take place over varying periods of time. The control and alienation of children, throughout the grooming process is exercised in various ways including force, threat/blackmail, befriending and providing gifts.

Using models of grooming is unhelpful as it suggests that grooming develops in particular ways when evidence shows that within both online and offline grooming processes, groomers often disguise their main intention to exploit and abuse a child by cultivating a personal and friendly relationship.

Groomers often develop the secrecy of their intended relationship with the child, including efforts to avoid discovery by the child's support network. Grooming in itself is abuse – the harm does not come at the end of a grooming process, the whole process must be acknowledged as harm.

Preferred approaches

Ensure language and descriptions used, reflects that grooming can take many different forms, and is a non-linear action. It is deliberately undertaken with the aim of befriending and establishing an emotional connection with a child, to ensure compliance, with the intention to abuse/exploit them.

It is important to remember that grooming does not always need to be prevalent for exploitation to happen.

Some key terms:

Modern day slavery / human trafficking



Key considerations

Both the terms Modern Day Slavery and Human Trafficking are used across the UK to describe the trafficking of Children.

Child trafficking is the collective terms used by United Nations and is defined in the Palermo Protocol as the “recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt” of a child for the purpose of exploitation.

The term trafficking can cause confusion due to the misconception that it has to involve movement from country to country. The movement element of trafficking can be applied no matter how far the distance and does not have to include international borders. For example, children are often described by professionals as being exploited, and then described as not being trafficked due to confusion over what trafficking means; “I believe he is being criminally exploited through county lines. I do not believe he has been trafficked”

Preferred terms

- To align with the UN recognised term, it is preferred to use Child Trafficking and Exploitation to describe the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation.

“I believe he is being criminally exploited. As part of this exploitation he has been recruited and moved for the purpose of exploitation so I believe him to also have been trafficked”.

Some key terms:

Problematic and Harmful Sexual Behaviour (P/HSB)



Key considerations

“Problematic and Harmful sexual behaviour has been defined as sexual behaviour by a child that is developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards self or others and/or be abusive towards another child, young person or adult. Those either exhibiting or being harmed by such behaviours may be male or female.”

CSA Centre of Expertise

It is important to remember that the majority of children displaying harmful sexual behaviour do not commit sexual offences as adults.

Preferred approaches

- Children who exhibit such behaviours must be considered as children first and their care and support needs considered in the same way as any other child. It is important that children are not stigmatised as a result of their behaviour and that Problematic and Harmful Sexual Behaviour is viewed as a safeguarding concern for the child who is harmed and the child whose behaviour is deemed to be harmful.

Preferred terms

- Use the full term of Problematic and Harmful Sexual Behaviour to describe such behaviours and do not use acronyms where possible.

Some key terms:

Child on child / peer on peer



Key considerations

The terms Child on Child Abuse and Peer on Peer abuse are commonly used to describe any kind of physical, sexual, emotional or financial abuse or coercive control exercised between children.

Avoiding these terms when describing children who have harmed is key to promoting understanding, empathy, and a developmental approach to addressing behaviours. The use of such terms can also carry stigmatizing connotations, potentially hindering a more nuanced understanding of the complex factors influencing children's actions.

It is important to recognise the developmental nature of childhood, focusing on prevention, intervention, and support rather than punitive measures. The goal is to foster an environment conducive to addressing root causes and promoting positive behavioural change, acknowledging that children are in the process of learning and growth.

Preferred terms

- Children should be referred to as “those who have been harmed” and “those that have harmed”. This is to avoid a sense of inevitability of such behaviours or the connotation that children are defined by their behaviours.



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This document is to be updated every 2 years.

