

Guidance on Language Use for Professionals Working with Young People at risk of Extra-familial Harm.



A Guidance for Professionals¹

When safeguarding children and young people, the language we use is critical in setting the framework for their support. This guide equips professionals with the knowledge and sensitivity to navigate the nuances of language in this context while fostering an understanding of lived experience that contributes to protection and empowerment. By embracing principles that challenge victim-blaming narratives and the child's perspective, we can collectively enhance our support for those vulnerable to exploitation.

It is essential to recognise that many young people at risk of extra-familial harm may have also experienced significant trauma and adverse childhood experiences. This document supports professionals across the partnership in using non-stigmatising and non-judgmental language, highlighting the significant impact language can have on shaping professional perspectives and outcomes for young people. By encouraging reflective practice in communication, the document supports the broader goal of developing and implementing our contextual safeguarding approach.

¹ In producing this guidance, we would like to acknowledge the contribution of Simone Nyarko (2018) 'Language Child and Adolescent Vulnerability': A Guide for Professionals and Practitioners supporting children and families in community setting. The Children's Society's guidance: Appropriate Language Child Sexual and/or Criminal Exploitation Guidance for Professionals (2018). City of Edinburgh Councils (2022) language document by the Children's and Young People's Reviewing Team.

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Key Terms

Child Criminal Exploitation: There is currently no accepted legal definition, but the [National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021 - updated 2023](#)² defines it as the use of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate, or deceive a child into criminal activity for the advantage of the perpetrator.

Contextual Safeguarding: An approach that extends beyond traditional child protection frameworks to address risks and challenges young people face in environments outside their homes.

County lines: The exploitation of young people by urban gangs to transport drugs to other markets, often involving trafficking and coercion.

Child trafficking: The recruitment, transportation, and exploitation of a child for purposes such as sexual, criminal, and financial exploitation, forced labour, and illegal adoption.

Children and Young People are anybody under the age of 18 although within the terms of this guidance, young people are children aged 11 – 17.

Community Guardians: Are adults who are present in the neighbourhood communities and transport links that could provide a safeguarding role. For example, park wardens, local takeaway owners and bus drivers.

Extra Familial Harm: Harm that occurs outside the family environment, including peer group settings, schools, neighbourhoods, and online.

Peer on Peer Abuse: Any form of abuse or coercive control exercised between children within their relationships and peer associations.

² [The National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021 - updated 2023](#)

Language of Concerns and Suggested Alternative in Relation to Extrafamilial Harm

The language used by professionals plays a critical role in preventing young people’s experiences of harm and exploitation. The following sections provide guidance on adopting language that is both trauma-informed and proactive in preventing harm. This approach aims to avoid victim-blaming and to better reflect the potential risks, helping professionals to intervene early and effectively.

We will try not to use	We will try to use
<p>Putting themselves at risk</p> <p>This implies that the child is responsible for the perpetrator's risks and that they can make free and informed choices.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The child may have been groomed. • The child is at an increased vulnerability of being abused and/or exploited. • A perpetrator may exploit the child’s increased vulnerability. • The child is not in a protective environment. • The situation reduces the child’s safety. • The location is dangerous to children. • The location/situation could increase the opportunity to abuse the child. • It is unclear whether the child is under duress to go missing. • There are concerns that the child may be being sexually abused/exploited. • It is unclear why the child is getting into cars. There are concerns that there is a power imbalance forcing the child to act in this way. • There are concerns regarding other influences on the child.
<p>Does not engage/would not co-operate</p> <p>This implies a lack of willingness or effort on the part of the child to engage.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The child did not feel safe enough to disclose. • The child appears to fear negative repercussions for disclosure. • The child is being criminally/sexually exploited or groomed and cannot disclose. • Child considers the relationship consensual, but it was formed in the context of exploitation. • Professionals have been unsuccessful in engaging young people.

We will try not to use	We will try to use
<p>Missing, absconded or run away.</p> <p>This implies voluntary or deliberate action by the child without recognising internal drivers and external influences.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The child’s safety is context driven. • The child does not feel able to stay at their current location. • The child is being groomed/ coerced to leave. • The child may consider leaving to be the safest option in this circumstance. • Someone else has control over this child’s behaviour. • The child has returned to a place of safety. • The child has not returned as expected. • The child is away from their usual environment. • The child is unaccounted for now.
<p>Sexual activity with...</p> <p>This implies consensual sexual activity has taken place. If it occurs within an abusive or exploitative context this term is not appropriate.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The child has been sexually abused. • The child has been raped. • There are reports of sexual abuse. • The child has described sexual activity; however, concerns exist that the child may have been groomed and/or coerced.
<p>Has been contacting adult males/females via phone or internet.</p> <p>This implies that the child or young person is responsible for the communication and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult males/females may have been contacting the child. • The child may have been groomed. • There are concerns that adults are facilitating communication with a child. • The child is vulnerable to online perpetrators. • There are concerns that others may be using online technology to access or abuse the child. • Adults appear to be using a range of methods to communicate with the child.
<p>Offering him/her/them drugs seemingly in return for sex.</p> <p>This implies that the child or young person is responsible for the abuse and can make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise abusive or exploitive behaviour.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The child is being sexually exploited. • There are concerns that the child has been raped. • Perpetrators are sexually abusing the child. • The child is being sexually abused. • The child’s vulnerability regarding drug use is being used by others to abuse them. • The perpetrators have a hold over the child by drug dependency.

<p>In a relationship with...</p> <p>This implies that the child or young person is in a consensual relationship and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The young person says that they are in a relationship with a person and there are concerns about that person's age, the imbalance of power, exploitation and/or offending. • The young person has been/is being groomed, exploited and controlled.
<p>Involved in CSE</p> <p>This implies there is a level of choice regarding the child being abused. A five-year-old would never be referred to as being involved in sexual abuse for the same reasons.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The child is vulnerable to being sexually exploited. • The child is being sexually exploited.
<p>Promiscuous</p> <p>This implies consensual sexual activity has taken place. Promiscuous is a judgmental term which stereotypes and labels people. It isn't appropriate in any context when discussing children and young people, but particularly if it occurs within an abusive or exploitative context.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The child is vulnerable to being sexually exploited. • The child is being sexually exploited. • This child has/is, been/being coerced into sharing images of themselves online.
<p>Prostituting themselves</p> <p>This implies that the child or young person is responsible for the abuse and can make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context. Changes in legislation have meant that child prostitution is no longer an acceptable term and should never be used.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The child is vulnerable to being sexually exploited. • The child is being sexually exploited.
<p>Boyfriend/girlfriend</p> <p>This implies that the child or young person is in a consensual relationship and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context. Children have been challenged in court with practitioners' recordings where a practitioner has referred to the perpetrator as the child's boyfriend or girlfriend.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The young person says that they are in a relationship with a person and there are concerns about that person's age, the imbalance of power, exploitation and/or offending. • The young person has been/is being groomed, exploited, and controlled.

<p>Drug running - He/she/they is drug running</p> <p>This implies that the child or young person is responsible for the exploitation and can make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child criminal exploitation (CCE). The child is being criminally exploited. • The child is being trafficked for criminal exploitation.
<p>Recruit/run/work</p> <p>This implies that the child or young person is responsible for the exploitation and can make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context of the behaviour.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The child is being criminally exploited.
<p>He/she/they is choosing this lifestyle</p> <p>This implies that the child or young person is responsible for the exploitation and can make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The child is being criminally exploited. • The child is being sexually exploited.
<p>Associating or spending time with 'elders'</p> <p>This implies that the child or young people are responsible for their exploitation and have the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The young people say that they are friends with a person or group of people and there are concerns about the ages of those people, the imbalance of power, exploitation and or offending. • The young people have been groomed, exploited, coerced and/or controlled. <p>Note: If the 'elder' is also under the age of 18 years old, this will need to be considered using language of vulnerability/exploitation and also requires a child protection process/response.</p>
<p>Offering him/her/them drugs seemingly in return for sex or to run drugs.</p> <p>This implies that the child or young person is responsible for the exploitation and can make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context relating to substance use.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The child is being sexually/criminally exploited. • The child is being criminally exploited through drug debt. • There are concerns that the child has been raped as they do not have the freedom or capacity to consent. • Perpetrators are sexually abusing the child. • The child is being sexually abused. • The child's vulnerability regarding drug use is being used by others to abuse them. • The perpetrators have a hold over the child by drug dependency.

Gang Involved or Affiliated

This implies that the child or young person is responsible for the exploitation and can make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context or powerful grooming process.

- The child is being sexually/criminally exploited.
- Violence and crime affected children, family or household.
- There may be harmful behaviours and or attitudes that exist towards violence and criminality within this peer network.
- It is unclear why the child is getting into cars. There are concerns that there is a power imbalance and powerful grooming forcing or compelling the child to act in this way.
- There are concerns regarding other influences on the child.
- The child/young person is being criminally exploited to distribute (drugs); part of a friend group who have been doing illegal things such as...

Note: If other members of the peer network are also under the age of 18 years old, this will need to be considered using language of vulnerability/exploitation and also requires a child protection response.

Running County Lines

This implies that the child or young person is responsible for the exploitation and can make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.

- The child(ren) in this location may be being trafficked and sexually/criminally exploited.
- There may be harmful behaviours and or attitudes that exist towards violence and criminality within this area.
- This environment may not be safe for these children.
- The location/situation could increase the opportunity to abuse child(ren).
- The child(ren) feels under threat/ coerced to remain in this location and/ or the grooming process is so powerful that the child believes this to be their choice.
- The child(ren) does not feel safe enough to leave this location.

Note: County Lines: Is s/he exploited through County Lines? This should always be framed as question where there is not an established link between County border locations or phone/social media 'lines' for the purpose of dealing/supply. There is a danger that broad use of the term 'County Lines' may distract practitioners from identifying and responding to children groomed, trafficked, and exploited for the purpose of local drug dealing or supply.

Gang(s) in the Area/ location.

This implies that the child or young people are responsible for the exploitation and have the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise an abusive or exploitative context or their right to be in the location without experiencing harm.

- Area impacted by episodes of serious youth violence.
- Groups of young people congregate to create safety for themselves.
- There may be harmful behaviours and or attitudes that exist towards violence and criminality within this space/ community/neighbourhood.
- The space/ community or neighbourhood may not be safe for this child or group of children.
- There appears to be limited safe opportunities for young people or adults to interrupt/ harmful behaviours and or attitudes that exist towards violence and criminality within this community/neighbourhood.
- This community requires support to address concerns or attitudes that exist towards violence and criminality within this space/ community/neighbourhood.
- Owing to conflict and tensions between these groups, other areas or locations in the borough may not be safe for this child or group of children.
- The location/situation could increase the opportunity to abuse vulnerable children.

Links to Additional Resources to Support a Contextual Safeguarding Approach

[Carlene Firmin – Language in Social Work: \[YouTube Video\]](#)

[Contextual Safeguarding Network: \[Resources\]](#)

[Beacon House Language Shift Resource: \[What We Say Comic\]](#)

[Includem Language Guide: \[Includem Language Guide\]](#)

[The Promise: \[Independent Care Review\]](#)

[Recovery Oriented Language Guide: \[MHCC Guide\]](#)

[North Lanarkshire Language Guide: \[Language Guide\]](#)



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