



# **Child exploitation** and **abuse**: an appropriate language guide

**The  
Children's  
Society**



**Child Sexual  
Exploitation  
Taskforce**



# Contents

1. Introduction
2. Who is a victim?
3. Speaking to victims of exploitation and abuse
4. Inappropriate terms index
5. Inappropriate terms
6. Additional resources

## Language considerations

**In the interest of clarity and concision, we have chosen to use the following terms throughout the guide.**

### **Child or person**

We are using these when referring to children, young people, and adults who have experienced abuse in childhood.

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### **Exploitation and/or abuse**

We are using this description to cover exploitation, abuse, human trafficking, and modern slavery. However, it is important to acknowledge that exploitation of both children and adults is a form of modern slavery and should be responded to under the Modern Slavery Act,<sup>1</sup> including providing victims with access to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) and associated support.

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### **Victim**

We recognise that the terms 'victim' and 'survivor' are often used interchangeably, although they have different emphases. We have chosen to use the term victim throughout to place the focus on the harm the child or person has or is still experiencing and to avoid implying that they have experienced resolution to these experiences.

<sup>1</sup> UK Public General Acts, Modern Slavery Act 2015.

# 1. Introduction

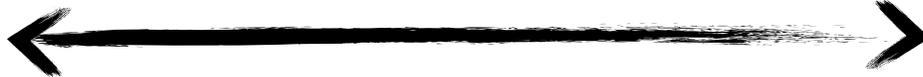
## What is victim blaming language?

Victim blaming language refers to any language that implies, intentionally or unintentionally, that a victim is responsible for the abuse they have experienced. The language we use is shaped by and normalised within the cultures we work, live, and spend time in. As language evolves, phrases that were once commonly accepted may no longer be appropriate. Therefore, it is crucial to maintain an open and reflective attitude to make sure that our language evolves in a way that supports and respects all individuals.

## Impact of victim blaming language



The abuser uses this to their **advantage** creating **more distance** between the **victim** and **those who can help**.



**When victim blaming language is used ...**

**Victims and survivors hear from abusers ...**

“No one will believe you.”

“No one else cares.”

“You can't trust anyone.”

“You're bad or naughty.”

**Victims and survivors hear from professionals ...**

“They're being un-cooperative.”

“They're in a relationship.”

“It was their choice.”

“They took the money.”



**Victims and survivors hear from society ...**

“They're a troublemaker.”

“They were asking for it.”

“Why didn't they fight back?”

“Why didn't they leave?”

**The victim or survivor is made to feel ...**

“They're pretending to care.”

“They think it's my fault.”

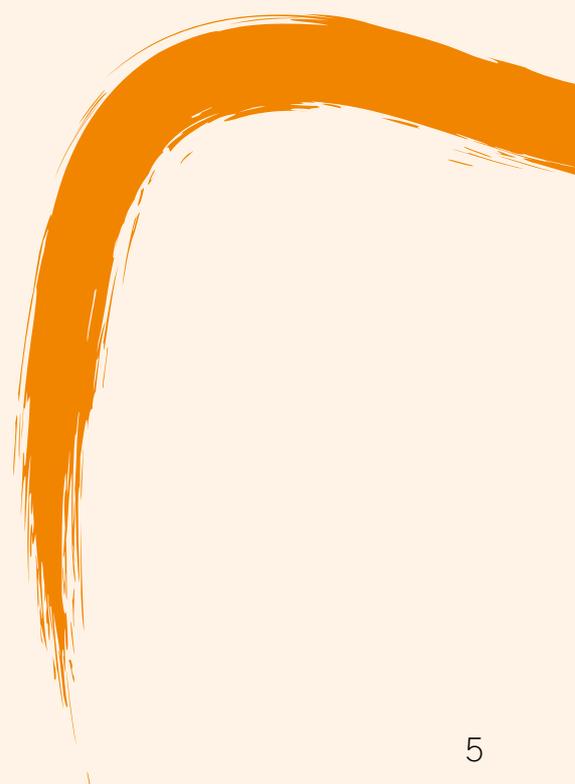
“It'll get worse if I try to get out.”

“Nobody will believe me.”

“I can't trust anyone.”

“They (the abuser) were right.”

“Nothing will change.”





## Why we have developed this guide

Victim blaming language exacerbates the trauma experienced by survivors of abuse and hinders their access to justice and support. Serious case reviews highlight the profound negative effect of victim blaming language on victims themselves and on professional and public perceptions of victims, often leaving them in unsafe and abusive circumstances. This underscores the critical importance of avoiding victim blaming language in all forms of communication as it ensures that the language used supports, rather than harms, victims.

It is imperative that appropriate terminology is used when discussing children and people who have been exploited or abused or who are at risk of exploitation and abuse. Language implying that the child or person is responsible in any way for abuse and crime that they are subjected to must be avoided to make sure that we safeguard them appropriately. It is also important to recognise that a child cannot consent to their own harm.

When appropriate language and terminology is used, victims of exploitation and abuse are more likely to feel heard and that their experiences are being recognised. It can also help to build trust between victims and professionals and aid victims in their understanding of the exploitation and abuse they have experienced.

Consider the influence of your language within written information and how that may alter the perspective and practice of any professional it is shared with. The language you use can change the responses to and outcomes for a child or person, and can do so even when you are no longer supporting them.

### Who is this guide for?

This guide is to be used by professionals in a range of contexts, such as;

- when speaking to children who are, or have been victims of abuse
- when speaking to a person who discloses abuse that took place in childhood
- when speaking to other professionals in multi-agency settings
- when writing or reviewing case notes or records
- when discussing children or people with any other professionals, parents or carers, businesses, media, or members of the public
- when developing educational content relating to exploitation and/or abuse
- when developing campaigns or communications relating to child exploitation and/or abuse
- when working with children and people to reframe and understand their experience of exploitation and/or abuse.

## How we developed this guide

This resource, enriched and restructured by the National Association for People Abused in Childhood (NAPAC), now includes a focus on adult survivors of childhood abuse.

Co-developed with The Children's Society, this updated edition builds on the appropriate language guide first published by The Children's Society in 2017.

The Children's Society works directly with child and young adult victims of exploitation across England and Wales, alongside delivering national policy and systems change work to help build a society which better prevents and disrupts child exploitation and helps children hold onto hope for their futures. Each of these areas of work provides a direct insight into the systemic issues caused or exacerbated by victim blaming language.

NAPAC holds expertise in working directly with adult survivors who have experienced abuse in

childhood. This work offers invaluable insights into the lived experiences of those affected by abuse, including those who traditionally would not have been heard from, particularly undisclosed victims.

When updating this resource, we consulted with professionals working in direct support, operational and strategic roles across policing, social care, and third sector organisations. These professionals provided valuable insights, which have been incorporated wherever possible, and their contributions have been important in ensuring this guide best meets the needs of those for whom it is primarily intended.

Although we were unable to consult with professionals in some sectors, this resource is aimed at all professionals who interact with children and people and oversee responses to them.

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The Children's Society's Big up the Bill resource explores what children and young people want during interactions with the police:

*"Police should use appropriate language, and make the person feel comfortable – no swearing or demanding."*

**Big up the Bill<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>2</sup> The Children's Society. Big up the Bill [Internet]. 2017 [accessed 2024 Aug 14]. Available from: [tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/big-up-the-bill/](https://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/big-up-the-bill/). p17.

The Independent Inquiry to Child Sexual Abuse spoke to victims and survivors across various settings and demographics to better understand their experiences when disclosing harm and abuse.

*"I think society as a whole often feels that people (other than heterosexuals who were abused by people of the other sex) are more complicit in their abuse somehow."*

**Victim and survivor<sup>3</sup>**

*"I feel there's too much blame on the abused."*

**Victim and survivor<sup>4</sup>**

*"When I reported the first incident I got laughed at. I just got laughed at ... there was nowhere really for me to turn"*

**Victim and survivor<sup>5</sup>**

"Authorities, especially the police, see young black girls as developing earlier and so are seen as "up for it".

**Women's support organisation<sup>6</sup>**

"We have had sexually abused boys tell us that they cannot tell anyone because their parents have told them that "Boys don't get abused.""

**Organisation supporting the Congolese community<sup>7</sup>**

<sup>3</sup> Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA). Engagement with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning+ victims and survivors [Internet]. 2022 [accessed 2024 Aug 14]. Available from: <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/document/engagement-lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-and-queer-questioning-victims-and-survivors.html> p13.

<sup>4</sup> IICSA. The Report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse [Internet]. 2022. [accesses 2024 Jul 24]. Available from [iicsa.org.uk/document/report-independent-inquiry-child-sexual-abuse-october-2022-0.html](https://www.iicsa.org.uk/document/report-independent-inquiry-child-sexual-abuse-october-2022-0.html), p63

<sup>5</sup> IICSA. The Report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse [Internet]. 2022. [accesses 2024 Jul 24]. Available from [iicsa.org.uk/document/report-independent-inquiry-child-sexual-abuse-october-2022-0.html](https://www.iicsa.org.uk/document/report-independent-inquiry-child-sexual-abuse-october-2022-0.html), p63

<sup>6</sup> IICSA. Engagement with support services for ethnic minority communities [Internet]. 2021 [accessed 2024 Jul 24]. Available from <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/document/engagement-report-ethnic-minority-communities-29-april-2021.html>, p16

<sup>7</sup> IICSA. Engagement with support services for ethnic minority communities [Internet]. 2021 [accessed 2024 Jul 24]. Available from <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/document/engagement-report-ethnic-minority-communities-29-april-2021.html>, p28

## 2. Who is a victim?

**Any child or person can be a victim of exploitation and abuse.** However, we know that some people are often not recognised as victims.

Often our own experiences, internal bias, or even prejudice, can impact how we identify and respond to victims. Understanding intersectionality can help professionals to better challenge their own bias, or the bias of other others. The following characteristics should be considered when trying to determine victimhood.

### Age:

- Is the victim a child? Children cannot consent to their own abuse.
- Did the abuse start when the victim was a child?
- If the child is transitioning into adulthood, is there recognition that they don't stop being a victim once they turn 18?

### Disability

- Does the child or person have a disability that makes it difficult for them to make informed choices, or give informed consent?
- Does the child or person have a disability or learning difficulty that makes it difficult for them to fully understand the activity they are taking part in, even when illegal?

### Gender

- Does the gender of the child or person mean professionals view them as a criminal, rather than a victim?
- Does the gender of the child or person mean only one type of exploitation is considered and others are dismissed?
- If the child or person was a different gender, would the situation be recognised as exploitation and/or abuse?

### Race

- Has the child been adultified because of assumptions and/or biases about their race and therefore the child is not recognised as a victim?
- Does the child or person's race impact on whether professionals to believe they are complicit in criminal activity, thus pursuing a criminal route instead of a safeguarding response?
- Does the race of the child, person, or abuser cause professional reluctance to investigate claims due to the fear of being perceived as racist?

## Sexual orientation

- Does the sexual orientation of the child or person impact whether the described situation is recognised as abuse and/or exploitation?
- Is the child or person viewed as a willing participant due to their sexuality?

## Socio-economic background

- Does this socio-economic background of the child or person impact whether they are viewed as a victim, or seen to be complicit in the abuse or crimes that may have been committed?
- Does the socio-economic background of the abuser impact whether the victim is believed, or dismissed?

## Trauma

- May the child or person be experiencing trauma which may impact how they engage with professionals?
- Is our professional experience causing compassion fatigue? If so, could this be impacting our perception of and response to victims?

In addition to challenging our own and others' belief systems, the following questions can also help us to centre the experiences and agency of the child or person, while critically examining the dynamics of power and benefit.

## Consider:

- who holds power
- who benefits
- who is making the choices
- the consequences if the child or person says no.

Focus on what has happened to the child or person rather than making a value judgement about their experiences. Recognise that assuming or suggesting consent has a real impact on victims' lives. It can take years, even decades, for victims to come to terms with having been abused and victim blaming can set this back significantly while also increasing the risk of revictimisation, further abuse, and repeated offences by emboldened abusers.

There are at least 8.5 million adults in England and Wales who experienced some form of abuse in childhood;<sup>8</sup> that is one in every four adults.

Given this, be mindful that at any time you may encounter, engage, or work with or alongside people who have lived experience of abuse, they may be experiencing the impact of trauma.

<sup>8</sup> Office for National Statistics, Child abuse in England and Wales [Internet]. 2020 [accessed 2024 Jul 15]. Available from: [ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/childabuseinenglandandwales/march2020](https://ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/childabuseinenglandandwales/march2020).

### 3. Speaking with victims of exploitation and abuse

While this guide focuses on language used by professionals, we want to also acknowledge that during interactions with the child or person who has been abused, they may also use victim blaming language when discussing their experience or the experience of others.

We want to be clear that there isn't a 'one size fits all' approach when supporting children and people who have been abused and a person-centred approach should be adopted to make sure that appropriate support is provided that meets the specific needs of each individual.

Children and people who have been abused may not recognise themselves as victims. Therefore, this language guide may not necessarily be appropriate for conversations with the victims themselves, but their use of victim blaming language can be indicative of grooming.

However, some professionals with relevant experience and training,

including specialist exploitation and abuse workers may find the reframing of language in this guide of use in their own direct work with victims around reframing and understanding their experiences.

For education professionals and those developing and delivering learning content for children and adults on topics such as healthy relationships, consent, criminal justice, county lines, fraud, and others, this guide can inform the language used and exercises exploring victim blaming and appropriate language within these.

When speaking with victims of abuse, at any age, we recommend using language that is preferred by the victim themselves as far as possible.

Remember children cannot consent to their own abuse. Professional judgement and knowledge of exploitation, abuse, and trauma can be used to reframe what has been said and remove blame from the victim.



**Below are some key considerations when speaking with victims of exploitation and abuse:**

- Create an environment where the young person feels comfortable and safe.
- Be aware of your body language, non-verbal cues, and tone of voice.
- Provide opportunities for a child or person to make choices.
- Provide opportunities for a child or person's voice to be heard.
- Ask open questions with sensitivity.
- Where possible, avoid the child or person having to repeat their story multiple times.
- Avoid judgemental and intimate questions.
- Take an intersectional approach to the child or victim. For example, how might their gender, class, or culture impact their experiences?
- Be sensitive to previous negative experiences the child or person may have had with professionals, or those who hold a position of authority.
- Move at the child or person's pace so that they can process what is being said and have time to form their responses.
- Communicate the next steps and keep them updated.

Remember: while this may be something you work with and discuss every day, this may be their first time talking about these experiences and they should be treated with empathy and respect.

## 4. Inappropriate terms index

**Alpha victim**

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**Boyfriend, girlfriend, partner or in a relationship with**

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**Broken, damaged, troubled**

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**Chaotic lifestyle**

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**Child pornography or indecent images**

---

**Compliant**

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**Cuckooing, juvenile, nominal**

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**Drug running, runner, work and recruit**

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**Has been contacting adults via the phone or internet**

---

**Historic abuse**

---

**In a relationship with**

---

**Involved in ...**

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**Money mule or mule herders**

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**Offering them alcohol, drugs, vapes, or other substances in return for sex, or 'X'**

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**Peer on peer abuse**

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**Plugging, banking, bottling or stuffing**

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**Promiscuous**

---

**Prostituting themselves**

---

**Putting themselves at risk**

---

**Rent boy**

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**Runaway or delinquent**

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**Sexual activity with ...**

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**Sextortion**

---

**Spending time with or associating with...**

---

**They are choosing this lifestyle**

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**They are involved in a gang or criminality**

---

**They are mature for their age**

---

**They need to take responsibility for their behaviour**

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**They will not engage with services**

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**Young person is vulnerable**

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## 5. Inappropriate terms

| Term                | Impact  |
|---------------------|---|
| <b>Alpha victim</b> | <p>While this term does include the word ‘victim’, it imposes a hierarchy of victimhood. It implies the victim has power and agency without reflecting the complexity of coercion, control, and constrained choice. This in turn can lead to the victim being criminalised.</p> <p>It can fail to acknowledge the ongoing support needs of that child or person and minimises the ongoing risk and harm they are experiencing.</p> <p>This term doesn’t acknowledge that the child or person may appear complicit in grooming and exploiting others to keep themselves out of danger.</p> |

### Alternative

- The child or person is being exploited and/or abused, while also inflicting harm on and/or exploiting other children or people.
- Although the child or person is inflicting harm on and/or exploiting other children or people, they are still being exploited and/or abused themselves. They require a safeguarding response alongside any interventions needed to prevent them from causing further harm to others.

| Term  | Impact  |
|---|---|
| <b>Boyfriend, girlfriend, partner or in a relationship with</b> | <p>This implies that the child or person is in a consensual relationship and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context including an imbalance of power or coercion and control.</p> <p>Referring to their abuse as a legitimate relationship could reaffirm the lies and manipulation used by abusers.</p> <p>It can also negatively impact victims receiving justice and abusers being sentenced appropriately, as seen in cases where child and adult victims have been challenged in court with recordings of where a practitioner has referred to the abuser as their boyfriend, girlfriend, or partner.</p> |

### Alternative

- The child or person says that they are in a relationship with a person. However, there are concerns about consent due to that person’s age, the imbalance of power, and/or indicators of exploitation and abuse.
- The child or person has been/is being groomed, exploited, and/or controlled.
- This person is not providing a healthy or safe relationship for the child or person.
- The child or person is using language that implies they may be the victim of grooming or coercion.

| Term                                    | Impact  |
|---|---|
| <p><b>Broken, damaged, troubled</b></p> | <p>These terms can be dehumanising for children and people who have experienced or are experiencing exploitation and abuse, and they deny hope for healing and recovery.</p> <p>These terms minimise the impact of abuse and fail to acknowledge the abuser(s) as responsible for deliberately causing harm.</p> <p>These terms also fail to acknowledge any strengths or positives that exists in the child or person's life which can impact the way other professionals respond to them.</p> <p>It's important to recognise that we only know part of what a victim is coping with, and that they may require support alongside or prior to engaging with justice.</p> |

**Alternative**

- This child or person has or may have experienced or is living with trauma.
- This child or person has experienced exploitation and/or abuse and may need support.

| Term                            | Impact  |
|---------------------------------|---|
| <p><b>Chaotic lifestyle</b></p> | <p>This term is similar to describing a child or person as vulnerable and can imply they are at fault for their lack of safety.</p> <p>It denies them agency, while also failing to recognise the complex factors that can mean someone has limited options for achieving and sustaining safety and security.</p> <p>Frequent changes can be a trauma response, so reframing these conversations to name the specific concerns can help avoid applying a problematic label.</p> |

**Alternative**

- This child or person has not been able to access effective support to enable them to work towards sustainable security or safety.
- This child or person is possibly living with trauma.
- This child or person may need access to a range of support options, which they can choose to engage with as and when they are ready and able.
- The child or person lacks security and safety.

| Term  | Impact   |
|---|--|
| <b>Child pornography or indecent images</b> | <p>This term fails to acknowledge the grooming, coercion, and exploitation that has led to the resulting material.</p> <p>The use of this terms implies it is a sub-category of legal, acceptable pornography, rather than a form of child abuse and crime.</p> <p>This also doesn't address the long-lasting impact on victims and the need for help and support, nor does it recognise the risk posed by abusers.</p> <p>It is illegal for anyone to hold, share, or sell child sexual abuse material and it is important to consider whether contact sexual abuse may also be taking place.</p> |

### Alternative

- Child sexual abuse material.
- This child may have been coerced into sharing child sexual abuse material.
- The abuser has created child sexual abuse material.

| Term             | Impact   |
|------------------|--|
| <b>Compliant</b> | <p>This term suggests that the victim is willingly participating in their exploitation and/or abuse, which undermines the nature of coercion and control. It wrongly implies a level of consent that is not present.</p> |

### Alternative

- The child or person may appear to comply due to fear or manipulation.
- The child or person is experiencing coercion and control.
- The child or person's behaviour may be a survival strategy.
- The child or person may be under significant duress.
- The child or person's actions should be viewed in the context of their abuse.

| Term                                | Impact   |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Cuckooing, juvenile, nominal</b> | <p>Terms like these may appear useful in identifying the situation a young person is in, but they risk being dehumanising and adultifying.</p> <p>A child should be seen and described as a child, even if they have been or are facing criminal charges. For families and households invaded by crime groups, this invasion should be recognised in how it is named.</p> <p>Be aware of any terms that can minimise the severity of the risks and harms experienced by the child or person.</p> |

### Alternative

- They may be being exploited, abused, or trafficked for the purposes of sexual or criminal exploitation.
- They are a child or young person.
- They are being considered a perpetrator although the offences they committed were due to them being a victim of exploitation and/or modern slavery.
- Their house or accommodation has been invaded by criminals or organised crime groups.
- The child or person has been forced or coerced to carry out a crime.

| Term  | Impact  |
|---|---|
| <b>Drug running, runner, work and recruit</b> | <p>These terms imply that the child or person is responsible for the exploitation and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. They do not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.</p> <p>Using terms which imply legitimate action or employment minimise the child or person's experience of abuse.</p> <p>Criminalising the child or person is a tactic used by abusers to protect themselves from prosecution. Referring to the child or person as willingly complicit reinforces the tactics used by abusers.</p> |

### Alternative

- The child has been targeted by abusers and is being groomed or made to distribute drugs.
- The child is a victim of human trafficking and is being criminally exploited.
- The child is being trafficked for the purpose of criminal exploitation.

| Term   | Impact   |
|--|--|
| <p><b>Has been contacting adults via phone or online</b></p> | <p>This implies that the child or young person is or was responsible for the communication and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context, playing in to the grooming and manipulation used by abusers.</p> <p>Focusing on the actions of the victim as opposed to the abuser can reinforce the belief that the child or person is to blame for the abuse they have experienced.</p> <p>Using online spaces is part of most people’s everyday lives. The anonymised nature of online spaces makes it easy to connect without sharing personal details, and abusers can exploit this to conceal their identities and motives.</p> |

**Alternative**

- There are concerns that the adult is facilitating or seeking communication with a child or with children.
- There are concerns that others may be using online technology to access or abuse the child.
- Abusers appear to be using a range of methods to communicate with the child or with children.
- The child or person is being targeted online with a view to exploiting/abusing them.

| Term                         | Impact  |
|------------------------------|---|
| <p><b>Historic abuse</b></p> | <p>Even when abuse is not currently being experienced, the child or person will be living with its impacts. We now understand that abuse has enduring, measurable physical, psychological, and social effects.</p> <p>Referring to any abuse as historic denies the existence of these impacts and minimises the severity of the crimes the person has experienced.</p> <p>This language can dissuade people from engaging with services, believing it is too late for them to access any justice or support. This can have many unintended consequences, especially if the person has also experienced abuse in adulthood.</p> |

**Alternative**

- This person experienced abuse when they were a child or when they were younger.
- This child or person is engaging with us about non-recent abuse.
- We believe this person may have experienced abuse at different points in their life, including in their childhood.

| Term                          | Impact   |
|-------------------------------|--|
| <b>In a relationship with</b> | This implies that the child or young person is in a consensual relationship and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context including the use of coercion and control by the perpetrator. |

### Alternative

- The child or 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 child or person has been, or is being groomed, exploited, and controlled.
- The perpetrator has manipulated the child or person to believe they are in a relationship.

| Term                  | Impact   |
|-----------------------|--|
| <b>Involved in...</b> | 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. |

### Alternative

- The child or person is a victim of sexual exploitation.
- The child or person is being criminally exploited (for example, to distribute drugs, hold weapons, store money, or similar). The child is being exploited.
- The child is a victim of human trafficking and/or modern slavery (where their exploitation involves being recruited, moved, or held by an abuser).

| Term                              | Impact  |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| <b>Money mule or mule herders</b> | <p>This dehumanising language is problematic because it is essentially describing children and people who have been exploited by criminal networks to perpetrate fraud and money laundering as animals.</p> <p>The term 'money mule' or simply 'mule' focuses the conversation entirely on the child or person's actions – in this case, fraudulent bank activity – and ignores the complexity of the situation and the child or person's exploitation, while implying consent and agency.</p> <p>Equally, describing those who groom and exploit children and adults for financial gain as 'mule herders' minimises their role as perpetrators of abuse and organised crime.</p> |

### Alternative

- The child or person is being or has been financially exploited.
- The child or person has been tricked, made, or forced to participate in fraud and money laundering.
- The child or person has been coerced into holding illegal funds in their bank account or into opening an account for this purpose.

| Term   | Impact   |
|--|--|
| <p><b>Offering them alcohol, drugs, vapes, or other substances in return for sex, or ‘X’</b></p> | <p>This implies that the child or young person 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.</p> <p>It is widely known that abusers use drugs, alcohol, vapes, and other intoxicants to abuse children. Equally, gifts of all kinds are a common grooming method.</p> <p>Criminalising the child or person is a tactic used by abusers to protect themselves from prosecution. Referring to the child or person as willingly complicit reinforces the tactics used by abusers.</p> |

**Alternative**

- The child or person is being sexually and/or criminally exploited.
- Drugs or alcohol are being used to facilitate the child or person’s exploitation.
- The abuser is using debt bondage to trap and continue to control and exploit the child or person.
- There are concerns that the child has been raped as they did not have the freedom or capacity to consent.
- The abuser is sexually abusing the child or person.

| Term                             | Impact  |
|----------------------------------|---|
| <p><b>Peer on peer abuse</b></p> | <p>The use of this term only recognises the harm and abuse that may happen to children of a similar age or developmental stage and fails to acknowledge that harm or abuse may be inflicted by children towards children of any age or developmental stage.</p> <p>It is also important to recognise the power imbalance that exists between children based on differences in personal characteristics such as age, ability, class, and gender.</p> |

**Alternative**

- Child on child abuse is taking place.
- The situation described is child on child abuse.

| Term   | Impact  |
|--|---|
| <p><b>Plugging, banking, bottling, or stuffing</b></p> | <p>These slang terms are used to describe the practice that involves packages of drugs being inserted into a child or person's body, commonly the rectum or vagina alongside oral ingestion.</p> <p>The informality of these terms does not reflect the reality of what is happening to a child or person. When used, they minimise the abuse that a child has experienced. By using slang terms that abusers may also use, professionals risk negatively reinforcing the narrative of choice and blame.</p> <p>While this practice isn't legally recognised as sexual abuse, the child or person should be given a response that recognises the sexual trauma they have experienced.</p> |

**Alternative**

- The child or person has been coerced to internally conceal drugs.
- The child or person has been coerced or forced to carry drugs internally.

| Term                      | Impact  |
|---------------------------|---|
| <p><b>Promiscuous</b></p> | <p>This implies consensual sexual activity has taken place. The word 'promiscuous' is a judgemental term based on assumptions. It also includes a significant gender bias as it is rarely applied to boys and men.</p> <p>It falsely implies the victim may be complicit in the grooming and abuse, a tactic used by abusers to diminish their responsibility.</p> <p>It isn't appropriate in any context when discussing children.</p> |

**Alternative**

- The child or person is a victim of sexual abuse and/or exploitation.
- The child or person is a victim of human trafficking and/or modern slavery (where their exploitation involves being recruited, moved, or held by an abuser).
- The abuser has used coercion and control to exploit the child or person.
- This child or person may be the victim of repeated exploitation or targeted revictimisation by one or more abusers.

| Term                           | Impact  |
|--------------------------------|---|
| <b>Prostituting themselves</b> | <p>This implies that the child or young person is responsible for the abuse and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.</p> <p>The term child prostitution has been removed from legislation, which makes clear that this is no longer an acceptable term and should never be used.</p> |

**Alternative**

- The child is a victim of sexual abuse and/or exploitation.
- The child is a victim of human trafficking and/or modern slavery (where their exploitation involves being recruited, moved, or held by an abuser, which is highly likely in this context).
- The abuser has raped or facilitated the child being raped.

| Term                              | Impact   |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| <b>Putting themselves at risk</b> | <p>This implies that the child or person is responsible for the risks presented by the abuser and that they can make free and informed choices without recognition of their age, circumstances, and lived experience or the realities of grooming, coercion, and control.</p> <p>This implies they have chosen to be at risk and discounts the lack of accessible safe options or the power to say no.</p> |

**Alternative**

- The child or person may have been groomed or exploited.
- There are a lack of protective factors surrounding the child or person.
- The situation could reduce the child’s or person’s safety.
- The location is dangerous to children.
- There are concerns that the child or person may be being exploited.
- It is unclear whether the child or person is under duress to go missing.
- It is unclear why the child or person is getting into [x] vehicle or visiting [x] location.
- There are concerns that there is a power imbalance forcing the child or person to act in this way.
- There are concerns regarding other influences on the child or person.

| Term            | Impact   |
|-----------------|--|
| <b>Rent boy</b> | <p data-bbox="512 255 1469 517">This term is a derogatory phrase that is used to describe young male sex workers and particularly those who have sex with other men. The term is homophobic and is often used as a slur for those not involved in sex work. It can also be used to describe boys under the age of 18 and people who have experienced sexual abuse and is therefore dismissive of the exploitation and abuse that has taken place.</p> <p data-bbox="512 539 1437 685">The informality of terms such as this can also act as a smoke screen, a plausible deniability for how degrading or inappropriate they are, especially when talking about victims of serious crimes such as abuse and exploitation.</p> <p data-bbox="512 707 1477 819">The term implies that the child or young person is responsible for the abuse and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.</p> <p data-bbox="512 842 1410 987">A gendered and homophobic term like this can also be used to minimise and dismiss the realities of sexual abuse experienced by boys and men, perpetuating the stereotype that only girls experience such abuse.</p> <p data-bbox="512 1010 1398 1122">The term child prostitution has been removed from legislation which makes clear that it and any similar terms are no longer acceptable and should never be used.</p> |

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### Alternative

- The boy or man has been sexually exploited or abused.
  - There are concerns the child or person has been sexually exploited or abused within the commercial sex industry.
  - The child or person has experienced group based sexual abuse.
-

| Term                       | Impact  |
|----------------------------|---|
| <b>Runaway, delinquent</b> | <p>These terms imply the child or person is at fault, that they are inherently problematic or a troublemaker, and implies they are not worth supporting.</p> <p>The term runaway implies the child or person has chosen to leave home or care of their own volition when they may have been under the coercion and control of an exploiter or felt they had to leave for their own safety due to experiences of harm, abuse or discrimination they were experiencing at home.</p> <p>The term also minimises the urgency of the situation when the child may be missing and at risk of serious harm.</p> <p>These terms can reduce the likelihood of other professionals engaging constructively with the victim. Risk factors may become exacerbated and embedded as that person has more negative interactions with professionals where their experiences are diminished, and their needs dismissed.</p> <p>Abusers can also predict these implied rejections by professionals and use negative interactions to increase the control they hold in a situation and leave the child or person no viable option for support.</p> |

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### Alternative

- The child or person is currently missing, and efforts must be undertaken to find them and ensure they are safe.
  - The child or person may have an unstable, abusive, or discriminatory home life and lack positive support.
  - The child or person has difficulty trusting services and accessing services.
  - The child or person has been or is known to the police and/or authorities. Safeguarding protocols should be followed.
-



| Term                            | Impact   |
|---------------------------------|--|
| <b>Sexual activity with ...</b> | <p>This implies consensual sexual activity has taken place. If it occurs within an abusive or exploitative context, this term is not appropriate and should not be used.</p> <p>It is never appropriate where the victim has been unable give consent through choice and has not had the freedom and capacity to make that choice.</p> <p>The victim does not have freedom or capacity to consent when:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ they are asleep or unconscious</li><li>■ physical force is used against them</li><li>■ they are intoxicated, 'drunk' or 'high' on alcohol or drugs</li><li>■ they are under the age of 16</li><li>■ they are 16 or 17 and the other person taking part in sexual activity is in a position of trust, such as a police officer, teacher, doctor, or social worker.</li><li>■ they are under the age of 18 and have been photographed or filmed engaging in sexual activity</li><li>■ they have a mental health condition or disability that impacts their ability to make choices</li><li>■ they are being pressured, bullied, manipulated, tricked, or scared into saying 'yes'.</li></ul> |
| <b>Alternative</b>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ The abuser has raped the child or person.</li><li>■ The child or person has been or may have been sexually abused.</li><li>■ Concerns exist that the child or person may have been coerced, exploited, raped, or sexually abused.</li></ul>  |

| Term              | Impact  |
|-------------------|---|
| <b>Sextortion</b> | <p>This is a widely used term which refers to online harm where exploiters obtain child sexual abuse material and then use this to extort the child depicted.</p> <p>Although widely used, this term fails to emphasise the coercion involved in this form of exploitation.</p> <p>Children cannot consent to their own abuse and should never be held responsible for this or any other form of abuse or exploitation.</p> <p>Terms such as this can inadvertently glamourise and diminish the abuse the child or person has experienced and the long-lasting impact this has on them.</p> |

### Alternative

- The child or person is being or has been a victim of sexually coerced extortion or financially motivated sexual extortion.
- The child is being or has been coerced into sending child sexual abuse images or material of themselves.
- The person is being or has been coerced into sharing explicit images.

| Term   | Impact   |
|--|--|
| <b>Spending time or associating with ...</b> | <p>When this is used in an exploitative context, it implies that the child or person is choosing to be in contact with the person grooming or exploiting them.</p> <p>It also implies shared culpability for any abusive or criminal acts carried out by the person they are described as being with. In reality a child who is being coerced, controlled, or manipulated does not have the capacity to make a free and informed choice.</p> <p>If the older person or 'elder' is under the age of 18, this will need to be considered using child protection processes.</p> |

### Alternative

- The child or person says that they are friends with a person. However, there are concerns about that person's age and/or an imbalance of power, or indicators of grooming, exploitation, and/or abuse.
- The child or person has been groomed, exploited, coerced, or controlled into criminal activity.
- The child is a victim of child criminal exploitation.

| Term                                    | Impact  |
|---|---|
| <b>They are choosing this lifestyle</b> | This implies that the child or young person is responsible for the exploitation and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative factors. |

**Alternative**

- The child or person is a victim of exploitation or abuse.
- The child or person is being trafficked for purpose of exploitation.
- A child can never consent to their own exploitation.
- The child or person may have experienced repeat targeting by abusers, including grooming and coercion, and lack access to safe options.
- The child or person is under coercion and control and unable to freely choose.

| Term  | Impact  |
|---|---|
| <b>They are involved in a gang or criminality</b> | <p>These phrases imply that the young person is choosing to do this. The use of the term 'gangs' minimises the violence caused to young people in the context of organised crime and youth violence. It also inherently implies choice.</p> <p>There are also potential racist connotations associated with society’s negative image of a gang and who gang members are which can further stigmatise non-white individuals and communities.</p> |

**Alternative**

- This child or person is being criminally exploited, likely by an organised crime group.
- This child or person is being groomed or at risk of being exploited by abusers or organised crime groups.
- This child or person is a victim of human trafficking and/or modern slavery and are being exploited to commit criminal offences.

| Term  | Impact  |
|---|---|
| <p><b>They are mature for their age</b></p> | <p>This phrase is most often used when discussing females who believe they are in a consensual relationship with someone who is older.</p> <p>The risk and harm posed to the child can be overlooked when professionals use this description, as it fails to recognise their status as a child. The phrase can be applied to children of any gender but is often used to describe girls to normalise or validate the age gap between them and an older male.</p> <p>Black children and young people are particularly at risk of adultification by professionals. They are less likely to be viewed as victims and are seen to have more agency, autonomy, and choice than they actually do.</p> <p>This is reflective of other forms of discrimination. It is therefore important for professionals to be aware of all biases and areas of systemic oppression which impact children's lives.</p> |

**Alternative**

- The victim is a child or young person and says that they are in a relationship with a person but there are concerns about that person's age, the imbalance of power, exploitation and/or offending.
- The child or young person has been, or is being groomed, exploited, and controlled.
- We are concerned the child or young person has described an abusive or coercive relationship.
- The abuser has manipulated the child or young person to believe they are in a relationship

| Term   | Impact   |
|--|--|
| <p><b>They need to take responsibility for their behaviour</b></p> | <p>It may feel as though a child is making choices and poor decisions, but no child or person is responsible for their own exploitation.</p> <p>Exploiters use manipulation and grooming to coerce children and people into criminal or sexual activity. The only person responsible is the exploiter.</p> |

**Alternative**

- The child or person needs support to understand the complex nature of exploitation.
- The child or person need support to understand what exploitation is, and how they have been groomed.
- The child or person needs support to understand that only the exploiter is responsible for what happened to them, and they are not to blame.
- The child or person needs help and support to understand how the exploiter is harming them and that they do not have their best interests in mind.

| Term   | Impact   |
|--|--|
| <p><b>They will not engage with services</b></p> | <p>This fails to acknowledge a child or person’s previous or ongoing experience of engaging with services and may impact their perceptions of support.</p> <p>People, especially children or young people who have become known to statutory services, may be expected to speak to lots of professionals. Impacts of funding, capacity, and staff transitions can cause victims to feel let-down, forgotten, and unsupported.</p> <p>This also implies that services are seen as safe and supportive to all children and people and doesn’t recognise negative experiences the victim may have had from professionals or those in positions in power.</p> <p>This also fails to acknowledge the ongoing risk or harm the person may be experiencing which prevents them from seeking or accepting support.</p> <p>This term also implies the victim accepts they are a victim of exploitation and/or abuse; yet many children and people do not recognise they are a victim.</p> |

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**Alternative**

- Due to the trauma they have experienced because of their exploitation or abuse, the child or person finds it difficult to trust unknown adults or people in positions of power.
  - Services have not yet found the best way to build relationships with the child or person.
  - Support was offered that did not meet the needs of the (young) person at that time.
  - It is recommended that the services try an alternative approach to engaging the child or person.
  - The child or person needs to be given different options, and the ability to choose how and when they want to engage.
  - We believe this child or person has been groomed and may be at risk of escalating threats if known to be talking to police assisting an investigation.
  - The child or person doesn’t recognise they are in an exploitative or abusive situation, which is impacting their willingness to accept support. We recognise this increases their level or risk.
  - There are concerns that the child or person may be being threatened if they report what is happening.
-

| Term                              | Impact  |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| <b>Young person is vulnerable</b> | <p>This term is valuable in recognising the child or person has experienced exploitation and can help to encourage empathy. However, it is the situation surrounding the person rather than the person themselves that is the cause of this vulnerability.</p> <p>Being specific about these environmental factors and vulnerabilities can be helpful to not only take any responsibility away from the young person but also to help design multi-agency interventions – for example, the young person and their family is living in acute poverty and this creates a situation in which they are vulnerable to exploitation.</p> <p>Be aware of terms that imply the child or person is inherently at risk, especially as this can reduce recognition of abusers' proactive exploitation tactics.</p> |

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### Alternative

- The child or person could be in a vulnerable situation.
  - The environment or situation could put the child or person at risk of exploitation.
  - The child or person could be impacted by the situation surrounding them.
  - The context(s) or environment(s) the child or person is in could make them vulnerable to exploitation.
-



# Glossary of terms

## Adultification

Adultification happens when preconceptions held about children lead to them being treated and perceived as being more 'adult-like'.<sup>9</sup> Adultification disproportionately affects black children, as evidenced in a number of serious case reviews in recent years. It perpetuates negative stereotypes and racism and can lead to significant safeguarding failures.

## Child criminal exploitation

Child criminal exploitation is when children and young people are forced or manipulated to commit crimes for the benefit of their exploiter(s). This can include the young person being coerced or forced into drug trafficking and cultivation, forced begging, money laundering, ATM/credit card theft, pickpocketing, vehicle theft, and carrying out robberies or acts of violence.

## Child sexual exploitation

Child sexual exploitation is a form of sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group forces, manipulates, or deceives a child or young person into any sexual activity for their own benefit. It can include the young person being forced or coerced to engage in direct sexual contact or to send indecent photographs or videos.

## Compassion fatigue

This refers to the emotional, physical, and psychological impact of helping others. This can sometimes also be referred to as 'burnout'. Those working with children and people (both directly and indirectly) who experience or have experienced abuse, are exposed to highly pressured and traumatic situations. This can lead to feelings of helplessness, or even minimisation of the abuse that they are responding to in their role.

## County lines

County lines is a type of criminal exploitation where organised crime groups use threats, coercion, and force to make individuals (mostly children and young people) hold, move, and sell drugs. Historically, the definition has focused on individuals moving these drugs across counties; however, it is now clear that children and vulnerable adults are often exploited to do this locally as well as across long distances. Equally while the 'lines' element refers to the phone lines used to sell drugs, in recent years this has expanded to increasingly include online methods to groom, control, and exploit children and vulnerable adults into selling drugs.

<sup>9</sup> Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation. Adultification bias within child protection and safeguarding [Internet]. 2022 [accessed 2024 July 26]. Available from: [justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2022/06/Academic-Insights-Adultification-bias-within-child-protection-and-safeguarding.pdf](https://justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2022/06/Academic-Insights-Adultification-bias-within-child-protection-and-safeguarding.pdf).

### **Financial exploitation**

Financial exploitation can happen to any person, from any background. It takes many forms, including exploitation within families and care placements as well as outside the home. Financial exploitation is a form of abuse. It occurs when an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to encourage or compel someone to undertake a financial activity that benefits the perpetrator or facilitator. The perpetrator(s) might coerce, control, manipulate, or deceive the young person. This activity is often criminal and therefore a form of child criminal exploitation and includes but is not limited to money laundering and wider fraud.

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### **Intersectionality**

This term was first used by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to describe the way in which various social categorisations, such as race, gender, and class, intersect and how a person can experience multiple forms of inequality and marginalisation from society.

Crenshaw first used this term when describing the disadvantage experienced by black women. Today this term is used more broadly to encourage a response that is specific to each person and recognises individual characteristics.

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### **Modern slavery**

Modern slavery is an umbrella term used to cover all aspects of trafficking and exploitation and is defined within the Modern Slavery Act (2015). Modern slavery is a serious crime that violates human rights. Child criminal exploitation and child sexual exploitation are both forms of modern slavery.

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**Every young person has the right to be safe, happy, and hopeful about their future.**

That's why we run services and campaigns to help children transform their lives and to change the systems that are putting young people in danger. Together, we can protect every childhood.

**childrensociety.org.uk**

**X:** @childrensociety

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**Facebook:** childrensociety

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**NAPAC's vision is of a world where no child experiences abuse. Until then, we envision a society in which everyone impacted by childhood abuse can access the support they need, when they need it.**

NAPAC offers free and confidential support to all adult survivors of any type of childhood abuse via telephone and email.

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**Facebook:** NAPAC – The National Association for People Abused in Childhood

**Tel (support service):** 0808 801 0331

**The aim of the Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) Taskforce is to enhance the policing response to group-based child sexual abuse exploitation to increase the confidence of victims and survivors, and the wider public.**

The Hydrant Programme lead the CSE Taskforce and are supported by two other national policing programmes, the Tackling Organised Exploitation (TOEX) Programme and the Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme (VKPP).

All are uniquely placed to offer support, advice and guidance to police forces, partners and stakeholders working in child protection and abuse investigation.

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**Child Sexual  
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Taskforce**