



OUR LANGUAGE TOOLKIT

WRITTEN BY YOUNG PEOPLE,
FOR PROFESSIONALS

HELLOOO THERE!

Thanks for stopping by and taking the time to check out our toolkit. You'll all know that language and the way we get spoken about as young people in care is really important to us. We wanted to write this toolkit for a few reasons:

- To better the practice of professionals.
- To help make the job easier, especially when building a relationship with young people.
- To give professionals a better understanding of how language can affect young people.

We know there are toolkits already out there but we were keen to add our perspectives to the ever-growing voices who are keen to change the narrative about the way young people in care are spoken about. Our primary aim is to get people thinking about the impact of their words and language on young people and their lives.

We hope you find this useful and that you'll also add your voices to the conversation.

Nickie, Mo and Tan x



LANGUAGE TOOLKIT

Set out here are words that we've heard used throughout our time in care. We've heard and read these words and phrases in meetings, our reviews and reports.

There are some words that young people understand have to be used, however there should be explanation around them and a better awareness of the issues faced by young people, rather than a word which encompasses all.



WORDS NOT OK TO USE AND REASONS WHY

OUR THOUGHTS

ATTENTION SEEKING / CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

This word suggests a young person is looking for something in a negative way. Some young people have come into care because of neglect and/or some sort of abuse. There is always a reason for their actions. Children need and deserve attention and they should be seeking it.

Ask - What is this young person actually seeking? Why are they seeking attention and what are they really crying out for? What does their behaviour suggest?

ALLEGED / FABRICATED

This word suggests the claim made is an assumption rather than real facts. A person wouldn't make up an allegation without some truth attached to it, it may not be the full truth, but there will always be some parts that need a further explanation of understanding. Learn to read between the lines.

Ask - What is the truth in this? Why is this young person disclosing it and what are the facts or emotions attached?

SERVICE USER / CLIENT

This word suggests it's a choice. However, most young people do not choose to be in care. And often, young people do not have a choice about whether they engage in services provided for them. There are consequences following 'non engagement'. The word 'user' makes the person sound like an addict. It is a very detached word. Services for young people should be built on a trusted relationship, rather than a client based and tick box type service. Young people may be using a service, but in reality, they are just living their childhoods, learning and growing.

Who are you actually talking about? Name them and be specific, that young person has an identity - don't just refer young people as a 'client'. These are young people that you are caring for, so treat them as if you would an individual.

UNWANTED

No child should ever read or ever be made to think they are unwanted. Whether this is their family, a foster carer or the local authority.

There is no alternative or further thoughts on this word. It should simply never be used for working with people. Young people may feel unwanted, and this word could be explored, but should never be said to them.



DIFFICULT TO ENGAGE / REFUSING

This phrase is used in a variety of contexts. When working with young people, this word puts the blame on to that individual rather than the worker. Sometimes a young person is not 'difficult to engage', but they have not been given the opportunity to meet where or when is convenient, or with someone they trust or perhaps the worker has not tried other means of communication.

Ask – Why? What is this young person dealing with that means they aren't 'engaging'? This word should be put back on to the worker, not the young person. Has this worker really tried everything? Relationship requires trial and error. Young people should be given the opportunity to refuse a service without consequences or labelling of 'non engaging'.

LIFESTYLE CHOICE

This word is often used to explain a young person who is behaving or acting in a certain way that is harming them or others.

But how does a young person know what a lifestyle choice is? This word sounds finite and suggests no hope for change.

Young people in residential care have so little choice available to them, every choice is made by the professionals in their lives.

Look at the reasons why the child is behaving a certain way and then separate that child from their behaviour. Have empathy and understand the trauma they may have experienced before assuming they are choosing their actions.

Be honest with young people about the choices that are available to them and allow them some grace to learn for themselves.

BEDS / UNIT

Dogs need beds. This word sounds so detached and dehumanises a place where a young person will call home for a period of time. A home is so much more than a bed or a unit.

Think about what is important to that young person in that space. Remember that where a child is placed is where they will call home.

CONTACT (CONTACT CENTRES / CONTACT WORKERS)

The word 'contact' makes it feel like a session or something that is brief. The use of the word 'Contact' sounds negative, professional and boring. It is also a word that has a criminal reference. What 'contact' is meant for is a time for young people to see their family. It can mean such a huge amount to a child or young person in care. It's not contact - it's invaluable time spent with family members.

Remember this is family time and it should be cherished and respected. Think about how you phrase 'contact' and use other words instead, such as 'family time'. When you understand its importance, also ensure you build a rapport with those people the young person is visiting. Treat it all as important.

SUPERFICIAL

This word has been used in the context of self-harm, suggesting there is a scale of severity. This belittles the risk and the impact or what the young person may be trying to say. There shouldn't be a scale of superficial to suicide and there shouldn't be a scale of support.

Ask – What is this young person really trying to communicate? Think about why a young person may be harming themselves and the risks surrounding this young person that are making them react in this way.



COMPLY

This word is often used in the context of the police or with being a criminal. This word suggests working with young people is a tick box exercise. This is also matched with the word 'not complying' and is only used negatively

Similar to non-engagement. It doesn't mean young person is not compliant, it just means they are making a decision and that decision should be respected.

AT RISK

Feels like such a subjective word – Higher / Lower risk young person can be so subjective dependant on the worker. A young person should never know whether they are high or low risk or be compared to a scale.

Ask – What is the actual risk the young person is experiencing? What is the risk to themselves or to others? Be specific and understand what context this wording may be best used for.

INDEPENDENCE / SEMI INDEPENDENCE

Young people felt this word should not be used as it normalised being totally independent. It also suggests that when leaving care, young people do not need anyone and this isn't true. We still need people around us.

Everyone should be inter-dependant; everyone should have someone they can turn too and rely on.

It is still a home to young people, whether it is being shared with others or on their own – it is still a home or a flat or house.

SECTION ... 20/31/30

Young people found they have often been referred to as 'Section..' These different orders are so confusing, and although the law might be necessary, young people should not be referred to or labelled this way.

Care orders should be explained to young people using child friendly language. Be transparent and honest with young people rather than just giving them a blanket statement.

ACRONYMS – THIS COULD BE A WHOLE OTHER TOOLKIT!

This feels like another language – surely, we should be child centred. Young people should not need a social work degree to understand the words used to describe them. They are incredibly confusing for young people and dehumanises what is going on for a young person in care. Acronyms should not be used around or with young people.

And the one we feel most strongly about LAC – Young people should not be referred to as LAC – they have names, identities and personalities and they certainly do not 'lack' anything. Young people don't refer to workers by their job titles so young people should also stop being referred to as LAC.

T.A – N.S – M.A. INITIALS USED FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

There have been a number of conversations regarding the use of initials to refer to a young person. Although some views in this conversation said that it can help to anonymise the young person, especially in emails/ documents that are sensitive. Others shared that it felt too impersonal.

We recommend that initials be used with understanding and in documents being shared with a young person, their name should be used.