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The opinions expressed in this document belong solely to Children Unite and ECPAT International.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper complements the revised [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](#). The paper outlines guidance on how to avoid using victim-blaming language, communication and behaviours.

What informed the paper?

This paper draws on the experiences of two groups of people. The first group includes young people and adults who have subjected to child sexual exploitation or abuse and children and young people associated with organizations working on child protection¹. The second group includes frontline workers and practitioners, academics and advocates who have experience of working in the ‘child protection’ sector.² This includes the two authors of the paper and members of a working group looking at preventing victim blaming terms for the revision of the Terminology Guidelines. The paper also draws on some key resources (see ‘useful resources’).

Who are the guidelines for?

- **Frontline workers and practitioners working directly with children:** in particular, children who have been or are being subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse – this includes **law enforcement and police, legal and judicial personnel, social workers and other members of the social service workforce, health workers and teachers.**
- **Staff from NGOs and CSOs delivering prevention, research or advocacy programmes** on the topic of child sexual exploitation and abuse - this includes those writing or designing communication materials, those delivering prevention and advocacy programmes and those undertaking research activities with children and young people.

¹ Consultations were held with children and with young and adult survivors/ victims of child sexual exploitation and/ or in Kenya, Malaysia, Nepal, Philippines, Uganda and UK.

² This includes the two authors of the paper, Helen Veitch and Claire Cody from [Children Unite](#) and members of the sub-working group as part of the revision of the Terminology Guidelines. The sub-group looked at victim-blaming terminologies and narratives and was composed of national and international civil society organisations, academia, and regional organizations from Europe and Latin America.



WHAT IS VICTIM-BLAMING?

Who is considered a 'victim'?

In this paper we use the term victim for children (or young people) who have been or continue to be subjected to sexual exploitation or abuse. We recognise that people who have lived experience of child sexual exploitation or abuse may choose to identify with the term “victim” or “survivor” or another term.³ In this paper, we have decided to refer to “victim and survivor” in an attempt to be inclusive, recognising that some people may prefer using other terms.⁴

What is victim-blaming?

Victim-blaming is any language or behaviour that implies (whether intentionally or unintentionally) that a person is partially or wholly responsible for abuse that has happened to them. It is harmful and can wrongfully place responsibility, shame or blame onto a victim, making them feel that they are complicit or responsible for the harm they have experienced.⁵

Victim-blaming implies that the victim is at fault in some way. It implies that the victim is the person that needs to change their behaviour rather than the abuser. Victim-blaming is often based on what a child is doing or saying, what they are not doing or not saying, the behaviour they display, the clothes they are wearing (or not wearing) as well as their family circumstances.

³ In the context of child sexual exploitation and abuse, the term “victim” is a crucial legal term. Outside the legal context, care should be taken to ensure that persons who have been subjected to child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse are not labelled “victims” against their will or in a way that diminishes them or makes them feel stigmatised. It is always advisable to check with the persons concerned how they want to be referred to. Please refer to the [Second Edition of the Terminology Guidelines](#) for more.

⁴ The principles outlined in this paper can also be applied to young people and adults who are victims of sexual abuse and exploitation.

⁵ Based on a definition of victim-blaming in ‘Challenging victim-blaming language and behaviours when dealing with online experiences of children and young people’, UK Council for Internet Safety Education Working Group, September 2022.



Examples of victim-blaming language and behaviours include for instance (but are not limited to):

- Implying that the child's location could have played a role in the abuse (i.e. they were on the street at midnight).
- Commenting on who a child associates with or is friends with.
- Commenting on whether a child is under the influence of alcohol or drugs (at the time of the abuse).
- Asking whether a child is sexually active.
- Questioning whether a child reports the abuse or exploitation they have suffered to the police.
- Questioning whether abuse has taken place when a child stays in contact with the abuser after the abuse has happened (this may be unavoidable for the child).

Victim-blaming can be **direct** or **indirect**.

Direct victim-blaming happens when a child is explicitly held responsible for what has happened to them. Examples include:

- Use of the term 'child prostitution'; 'child sex workers' or when children are described as 'prostituting themselves' or 'selling sex'.⁶
- When a child receives an abusive message online, saying that it is the child's fault for accepting a friend request from someone they didn't know on social media.
- Blaming a child when they send a sexualized image of themselves.

⁶ For more on terms – please refer to the [Second Edition of the Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](#).

Indirect victim-blaming is more common but can be harder to identify and may involve more subtle use of language, or even facial expressions which inadvertently place blame on the victim. It often happens when we are trying to help a child after they have been subjected to sexual exploitation or abuse and may be based on norms in society or narratives about children or gender. Examples include:

- When speaking to a child after a disclosure of abuse, telling them what they should have done differently in that situation.
- After a disclosure of online abuse, taking away a child's device or banning them from using an online platform, app or game as a consequence.
- Suggesting that a child should change their behaviours or responses following abuse to "protect themselves" and take responsibility for keeping themselves safe. Which may unintentionally suggest the child needs to change, not society or the abuser.
- Using phrases such as: 'they put themselves at risk' or that they engage in 'risky choices' or 'risky behaviours' or 'are making lifestyle choices' when describing a victim's behaviour.

WHY IS VICTIM-BLAMING HARMFUL?

Victims and survivors of sexual exploitation or abuse may not seek help or support:

One of the key barriers that stops victims and survivors from seeking help is a fear that others may blame them for abuse or the feeling that they are to blame for abuse. Through using victim-blaming language, practitioners reinforce this feeling of self-blame. This can leave victims and survivors feeling unsupported and misunderstood and may prevent them asking for help in the future.

Victims and survivors' experiences of sexual exploitation or abuse may not be treated seriously:

Victim-blaming diminishes the child's experiences of abuse or exploitation and can prevent practitioners, families, friends and the victim/survivor themselves from recognising certain behaviours as abusive. This may result in no support being offered to a victim of sexual exploitation or abuse and make it likely that the victim will not disclose abuse in the future.





Victims and survivors' recovery and care may be stalled or stopped:

Services may focus on the victim changing their behaviours or their decision-making following abuse. This unintentionally suggests the victim/survivor needs to change. This does not address the societal norms or structural causes underlying abuse. An example of this is practitioners only offering individual counselling to victims and survivors and not recognising the need for advocacy to address changes to child protection systems or wider societal change such as tackling harmful gender norms.

Victim-blaming perpetuates harmful social (and gender) norms:

International research suggests that victims and survivors are often blamed for the abuse. Community members and services may, for example, believe that if a child received something, such as money or food from the abuser, then 'what do they expect'? This feeds into a recognised social norm, that those who perpetuate sexual exploitation and abuse of children are often socially tolerated by community members.⁷

⁷ See Buller, A.M., Pichon, M., McAlpine, A., Cislighi, B., Heise, L., and Meiksin, R. (2020) Systematic review of social norms, attitudes, and factual beliefs linked to the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents. *Child Abuse & Neglect* 104 (2020) 104471

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR FRONTLINE WORKERS AND PRACTITIONERS

As frontline workers and practitioners, we have a responsibility to support children's agency, and to actively challenge the use of victim-blaming language, communication and behaviours.

Victim-blaming includes **what we say** to children, **how we act** (our body language or facial expressions) and **what we write** about children.

1. FOCUS ON ABUSIVE BEHAVIOUR: USE LANGUAGE THAT EMPHASISES THE MOTIVATIONS AND DECISIONS OF ABUSERS NOT VICTIMS

Why is it important?

Focusing on describing abusive behaviours will help to bring responsibility back to the person who sexually exploited or abused the child.

How to implement this principle:

- Recognise that children often have to select certain 'alternatives' in a context of constrained circumstances. We may not understand or be fully aware of every child's unique situation or needs. Focus on what the abuser has done not on what the child has done or the background / circumstances of the child.

Ask yourself "Does this language place the blame, shame, guilt etc. on the victim, or the abuser?"

Quote from a victim/survivor of child sexual abuse or exploitation

Here are a few examples:

- In a situation where a child victim has run away from a shelter home, focus on the abuser's behaviour which may have involved threatening the victim if they did not run away or that the abuser may have taken advantage of the unstable living situation of the child.
- In a situation where a child victim has taken alcohol or drugs, look at the possibility of the abuser using alcohol or drugs to disinhibit their victim as part of their grooming behaviour.
- When a child is homeless and has sex with someone so that they have a place to stay for a few nights. Recognise that this situation may feel safer for them than sleeping on the streets. Focus on the adult abuser's behaviour who is taking advantage of the child being in a vulnerable situation.
- When a child sends a sexualized image of themselves to an abuser - focus on the abuser's grooming behaviour to obtain this image, or on the misuse of this image by the abuser.

2. BUILD AND MAINTAIN SAFETY AND TRUST WITH VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS: DEMONSTRATE THAT YOU CAN BE TRUSTED, BY RESPECTING AND NOT JUDGING CHILDREN

Why is it important?

The use of language by frontline workers and practitioners can contribute to either building or damaging trust and a sense of safety for victims and survivors. Being mindful and transparent about the language you or others use in certain contexts about victims and survivors helps to build trust between frontline workers / practitioners and victims and survivors. As victim-blaming language is often used in the legal process, it is particularly important that law enforcement and legal practitioners use language that does not blame victims and survivors when speaking directly to them.

*Remember
to be gentle, we
may be uncomfortable
with these terms at first.*

*Quote from a victim/survivor of child
sexual abuse or exploitation*

How to implement this principle:

- Explain when and why (in which contexts) you may need to use specific legal language (that may be victim-blaming) and the difference between legal language and common language. When talking to the victim/survivor, only use specific legal language when it is necessary, and give them a choice of 2-3 terms or words that can be used instead of the legal language.

Use words that empower and uplift us rather than making us feel broken or beyond help. Terms that focus on recovery, support, and the future can help in fostering a positive outlook.

Quote from a victim/survivor of child sexual abuse or exploitation

- Ensure that the language you use is not overly technical or complex, that victims and survivors understand what words mean and why they may be used in different contexts. Explain all abbreviations.
- Avoid using negative generalisations such as 'difficult', 'disengaged', 'refuses', 'uncooperative', 'abnormal' or 'problematic' when writing or speaking about a victim or a survivor's behaviour or their background/circumstances.
- When writing about or talking about victims, focus on their strengths but do not minimise the harm caused by abuse or overplay their resilience and ability to 'bounce back'.

3. GIVE VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS CHOICE AND CONTROL OVER THE LANGUAGE USED ABOUT THEM: ASK VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS ABOUT WHAT LANGUAGE THEY PREFER

Why is it important?

Giving control and choice back to victims and survivors is central to the recovery and healing process. At the same time, we should use language that reflects the lack of control that victims and survivors have in abusive or exploitative situations.

How to implement this principle:

- Talk to children about terms or phrases that they may prefer to use. This allows frontline workers and practitioners to explain why, legally, some terms may need to be used and in what context and allows victims and survivors to agree on terms they would like to be used outside of the legal space.

The experience of child sexual abuse is characterised by a lack of choice, so giving us some choice back by asking us about the language we prefer is really important.

Quote from a victim/survivor of child sexual abuse or exploitation



- Avoid using words or phrases that might signal that you do not believe the victim/ survivor such as ‘alleged’ or ‘no evidence of’. In contexts of justice proceedings, you should clearly explain to the victim/survivor why these terms have to be used.
- Think about the words you say, and also what you write down when writing about a child and their experience. The language you use, and how you describe a child shapes their views of you, and others’ views of them. This is valid for case notes as well as for research and other public reports.
 - » For example, in case notes avoid using passive sentences, try to clearly establish and communicate what the victim/survivor has been subjected to. If confidentiality allows, replace the use of case references with the victim’s name so that practitioners feel more connected to the individuals being discussed⁸
 - » In research with children, ask child participants how they want to be referred to and cited in research publications.
- If you need to speak publicly or write about a victim/survivor or a group of victims/survivors (for example as part of an advocacy campaign), share a range of different terms and language that can be used to describe them (such as ‘survivor’ or ‘person with lived experience of...’) and ask the group to choose their preferred terms.
- Some children feel that the use of the term ‘victim’ signals weakness or a lack of strength and may prefer the term ‘survivor’ to ‘victim’ because it is strength-based. Others may not like either term. Whichever term victims and survivors prefer to use, frontline workers and practitioners should avoid using language or communications that replicate abusive power dynamics.
 - » For example, it can be helpful to use terms that describe children’s role in the initiative such as ‘peer researcher, youth advocate or child representative’ rather than as a ‘survivor’ or ‘victim’.

⁸ This is an example from police/law enforcement officers in Making Words Matter - see useful resources

4. UNDERSTAND AND RESPECT VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS' UNIQUE EXPERIENCES OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE: ACTIVELY LISTEN TO, OR FIND ALTERNATIVE NON-VERBAL WAYS, TO UNDERSTAND VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS' EXPERIENCES AND KEEP AN OPEN MIND

Why is it important?

Not truly understanding the nature of child sexual exploitation and abuse or children's experiences can lead to victims and survivors feeling misunderstood and dehumanised by frontline workers and practitioners or even feeling that they are not believed. Active listening and keeping an open mind will improve our understanding about victims and survivors' lived experiences of sexual exploitation and abuse.

How to implement this principle:

- See children as 'consultants on their own life experience' and consult with them to determine how their life experiences are told and shared.
- Actively listen to children by regularly discussing with them whether they want to continue participating in an activity (gain their consent regularly rather than as a one-off event at the beginning of an activity).
- Consult with victims and survivors about their healing process and be mindful about putting pressure on them to participate in programmes or services. Respect their decision not to participate if this does not serve their own healing journey.
- Children may not have the words (or the signs if they have hearing disabilities) to explain their experiences. Be open to using or developing new words, signs or methods that do not rely on verbal communication to understand the child's experiences. This might include drawing, writing, using images, objects or stories to help support communication.

Don't over simplify - experiences of exploitation are complex and while they cause significant harm, they can offer us things we feel are missing from our life. You need to be able to understand the nuance of children and young people's experience.

Quote from a victim/survivor of child sexual abuse or exploitation

- Sometimes, victims and survivors do not recognise what has happened to them as abuse and may defend abusers or believe they are in positive or equal 'relationships' with abusers. In this situation, frontline workers and practitioners will need to understand victims and survivors' perspectives but at the same time, start to sensitively challenge victims and survivors' views in ways that are respectful.
- Involve victims and survivors in risk and needs assessment processes - discuss the potential risks they face and their ideas for how these risks can be mitigated. Consider using terms such as 'support' or 'safety planning' for victims and survivors.

5. BE SENSITIVE TO CULTURAL, HISTORICAL, AND GENDER ISSUES: USE CULTURALLY SENSITIVE LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION THAT CHALLENGES NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES AND BIASES TOWARDS VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS

Why is it important?

Every child is an individual living within a specific family, community and society. Frontline workers and practitioners should be aware of the meaning of words, terms or slang that is used locally - which may include victim-blaming language. Although it is important that frontline workers and practitioners use language, communication and behaviours that are sensitive and respectful to victims and survivors' cultural, historical and gender contexts, it is also important that frontline workers and practitioners challenge the use of victim-blaming in all its forms.

*Language is
abuser friendly
not victim friendly.
Language can also
seem very intrusive and
questioning. We need
new words to describe our
experiences.*

*Quote from a victim/survivor
of child sexual abuse or
exploitation*

How to implement this principle:

- Identify local terms or language that are culturally appropriate and do not blame victims and survivors.
- Plan to be inclusive - your approach and the way you communicate language will differ depending on children's capacities and identities. Also, think about who else needs to be involved in discussions about language. Who else surrounds the child? Family members, the wider community, do they understand the meaning of these terms?

- Materials/content for victims and survivors can be reviewed for triggering content by those with lived experience of the issue - and triggering content can be re-worded or removed.
- Challenge victim-blaming language, communication or behaviours (used by frontline workers and practitioners but also by victims and survivors and peers) in non-judgemental ways by explaining the impact of victim-blaming on children and/or exploring the negative cultural norms that the victim-blaming language is based on.
- Awareness and education materials/content for children should use age appropriate and 'children friendly' language (i.e. informal language used by children). Materials/content can be reviewed or piloted with children before use.



USEFUL RESOURCES

Guidance: Language Matters: Use of language in child sexual abuse & exploitation practice. 2022 Review. Barnardo's. Find this guidance [here](#)

Guidance: Guidelines for policy makers on engaging with victims and survivors of child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. *Nothing About Us Without Us* by the Council of Europe. Find this guidance here in [English](#) and [French](#)

Guidance: Challenging victim-blaming language and behaviours when dealing with online experiences of children and young people, UK Council for Internet Safety Education Working Group, September 2022. Find this guidance [here](#)

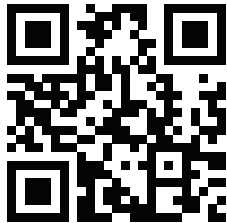
Practice and Knowledge Briefing: *Making Words Matter. Attending to Language when working with children subject to or at risk of Exploitation.* Find this briefing [here](#)

Article: Systematic review of social norms, attitudes, and factual beliefs linked to the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents. Find this article [here](#)



SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN
 CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE MATERIAL
 SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN
 SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN
 SOLICITATION OF CHILDREN
 FOR SEXUAL PURPOSES
 SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN
 TRAVEL AND TOURISM
 SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN
 CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE MATERIAL
 TRAVEL AND TOURISM
 VICTIM
 SURVIVOR
 CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE MATERIAL
 SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN
 CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE MATERIAL
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