

AN EXPLORATION OF LANGUAGE USED BY PROFESSIONALS THAT WORK WITH CHILDREN THAT HAVE EXPERIENCE OF CARE



# Contents

Scope.....	2
Introduction .....	2
Methodology.....	2
The Promise .....	3
Literature Review.....	4
Feedback from Young People .....	6
Conclusion.....	9
Recommendations .....	10
References .....	11

# Language and Communication

## Scope

The purpose of this case study is to review feedback from children and young people in relation to the language of care alongside wider themes of communication, with particular consideration of the aims of the Promise.

## Introduction

Language is at the very heart of social work practice. Just as social work has evolved over the years, so too has language developed to reflect the various changes in our society. However, implementing these kinds of changes across systems takes time and significant effort. This case study seeks to compile evidence from various first hand testimonies, conversations and group sessions with care experienced children and young people in Stirling who put forward their views on communication and the language used by social workers and other staff. Staff have engaged with care experienced young people across a number of different placement types and with varying experiences of social work involvement, primarily through the ongoing work of Stirling Champions Board. The study draws on the Independent Care Review and key aims of the Promise as well as some literature exploring the importance of using considered language in social work.

## Methodology

The views of children and young people in Stirling are central to this study and its recommendations. This primary research was carried out by Morven Beattie, Lead Officer of the Promise, in conjunction with Stirling Champions Board primarily between February and July 2022, although some further discussion did take place in the period after. To collect the children and young people's views, a number of 1-1 interviews were held alongside wider group discussions on the children's experiences of Social Work involvement in Stirling.

Children were aged between 4 and 18 and had direct lived experience of the care system, either through home supervision, kinship care or foster care. In group discussions, the young people were grouped roughly according to age and these were held in person.

Complimenting this primary research, Peter Ward-Stoddart, Policy Officer, created a short Literature Review, compiling a number of different sources from academic and professional journals and articles.

# Language and Communication

## The Promise

The Promise represents an overarching shift in how children and young people can expect to be looked-after by the government, local authorities and other corporate parents. The Promise reported that *“Care experienced children and young adults have told the Care Review that their time looked after by the state often felt cold, overly professionalised, stigmatising and uncaring.”* (Independent Care Review, 2020, pg 87). Arguably the language we use is a contributory factor and is therefore worthy of attention..

The Promise makes two specific points in relation to our use of language and how this impacts on the foundations of care. These are:

*“Scotland must change the language of care. Language must be easily understood, be positive and must not create or compound stigma.”*

*“Scotland must understand that ‘language creates realities’. Those with care experience must hold and own the narrative of their stories and lives; simple, caring language must be used in the writing of care files.”*

Both of these statements are crucial for understanding the need for language to shift if we are to #keepthePromise.

# Language and Communication

## Literature Review

There is a breadth of literature related to the language used in social work, particularly in relation to communicating with children and young people. In this review some key points have been highlighted from a range of sources.

Social workers deal with a plethora of complex issues, and children and young people involved with social work often have to deal with multiple layers of trauma. This naturally leads to conversations that are challenging, focusing on risks and weaknesses which can in turn give rise to overly negative language. This is not a new phenomenon and Salleeby (1996) highlights the importance of language in adopting a strength based approach to empower children and young people. He states:

*“Words do have the power to elevate or destroy. The profession's discourse on clients can be noble or base depending on the words used. Words can lift and inspire or frighten and constrain. Words are the aliment that feeds the sense of self. Thus, social workers are obligated to examine their dictionary of helping.”* (pg 298).

The importance of language cannot be understated, and as Saleebey highlights, social workers have the power to frame children's lives through the reports they write, and the conversations they have. This is as true now, as it was when Saleebey was writing nearly thirty years ago and is echoed by the primary aims of the Promise.

Another key aspect of social work practice identified by some of the literature is that communication with children involves so much more than just language. Morrison (2016) explores this theme and consolidates a number of different sources reviewing best practice for communicating with children and young people. She says:

*“This research consistently demonstrates that children like it when social workers have qualities such as honesty, reliability and consistency (Luckock et al, 2006; Munro, 2011). Whincup's (2015) study of social workers' engagement with children highlights further capacities that influence their communication with children. Here children described how they appreciated social workers who cared for them, listened to them (which was linked to social workers' subsequent actions), were playful (or fun), and were motivated to work with them (this was interpreted as prioritising spending time and meeting with them).”*

This highlights the importance of respect and consistency for social workers looking to develop and maintain relationships with children and young people. Moreover, it highlights that listening is just as important as talking when it comes to communicating with children and young people.

# Language and Communication

Jargon, including acronyms and initialisms, is among the most fiercely debated areas within social work practice, and it forms so much of the social work lexicon. Naqvi (2014) posits:

*“Social work, like every profession, cannot be condemned for having language shortcuts. But the sensitive and very human nature of its work perhaps means the profession has a greater need to guard against language that depersonalises and stigmatises.”*

This is a fair assessment and these “shortcuts” as Naqvi describes do make it easier to communicate with other staff and can help us to save time. However, an account published by Community Care in 2018 highlights the impact this has on care experienced children and young people as well as parents and carers. The author (who writes anonymously) states:

*“You’re already frightened, you’re already acutely aware of the power dynamic; it takes the strongest and most confident of us to speak up in front of professionals and confess you don’t have a clue what they’ve just said.”*

*“Because when you’re in the child protection system, it feels like everything has a consequence. If you say you don’t understand, they may think you’re stupid, or ill-educated, or illiterate – more reasons to take your children away.”*

This testimony echoes the importance of using considered language and highlights the potential impact that confusing jargon can have in perpetuating an unhelpful power dynamic whereby children, as well as adults, are made to feel worthless. Avoiding jargon and using simple and plain language may not fully “solve” this dynamic, but it can help to create a supportive and encouraging environment for everyone coming into contact with social work services.

Meetings such as children’s hearings are a key example of meetings where language is important. However, it is also important to highlight the centrality of written language alongside conversations and meetings. Rodgers (2020) argues:

*“The administrative pressure around recording information needs to be balanced with the fact that it can greatly contribute to and strengthen the relationship between a social worker and child. The words we choose to record information can create a narrative of someone, it can paint a picture of them on the page, and that narrative can go on to influence how they’re treated, and it can greatly shape the decisions they go on to make when they enter the adult world.”*

Case records can conceptualise the narrative around a child’s life and often have a far more wide-reaching impact than individual conversations and meetings. The language used in written reports and case records is just as important as the language used in day-to-day communication. This is a key point raised across the literature and by the Promise.

# Language and Communication

## Feedback from young people

While the literature and the aims of the Promise may portray a system which requires significant overhaul, much of the feedback from young people was positive and they highlighted a great deal of good practice.

- Young people commended social work staff for being respectful and for listening to them when specific words or phrases were highlighted as unsuitable. This was one of the most important things for young people – they understand that people make mistakes and sometimes it is easy to slip into using language that is so engrained. However, so long as they felt like staff respected their wishes and listened to them, they would continue to feel supported. One young person said *“If you make a mistake be honest about it. Just saying sorry means more than coming up with excuses.”*

There were a number of different specific words or phrases which cropped up in discussion, time and time again. Some particular ones that stood out, with potential alternatives are:

- Use of LAC/LAAC was identified in nearly every conversation with young people. It made young people feel as though they were lacking in something and a variety of alternatives were identified including “care experienced”, child in care, or looked after being written out or spoken in full.
  - “*Contact*” was raised as being particularly clinical, especially for something so important for children’s relationships with family. A potential alternative identified was “*family time*”.
  - Other phrases raised in discussion were: “*siblings*” where young people may prefer brothers and sisters; “*respite*” with an alternative being short breaks;
- Relatedly, many children and young people highlighted they did not like it when staff used acronyms or initialisms. It’s easy to assume we all speak the same language but phrases like LAC, IRD, CP, TCAC, YHLG, CSP, ACRA, SCIM, DV, CSE, HCSP etc. are rarely obvious to someone if they are hearing it for the first time. This list could be a lot longer, and while it may make communicating easier for staff, we have to ask ourselves – does this make it easier for children and young people to understand some of the processes going on around them?
  - Children highlighted the positive impact of staff being direct and honest with them and said they appreciated when staff made an effort to simplify things for them. They acknowledged things were not always going to be easy for them but appreciated when staff did not “*sugarcoat*” things or make false promises. Another highlighted how they felt respected when their social worker called them instead of their carer to tell them something.

# Language and Communication

- Staff were also praised for making an effort to talk to children and young people about aspects of their life other than just their care experience and highlighted how important these conversations were for relationship building. One person said *“Building that relationship, it just doesn’t happen overnight, we were like “Ah actually she’s alright. She seems down to earth”* and this helped them to open up about what was going on around them.
- Some young people also said they appreciated when staff had made an effort to talk to them using alternative methods of communication such as Whatsapp. One young person said *“It’s better than having to speak on the phone all the time, cos I don’t like speaking to them sometimes, but I can work out what to send in a message.”* Many young people also said they appreciated the times when they could have a laugh with staff and said this was important, especially when things were difficult.
- However, some young people identified that, when receiving difficult news they would much prefer if it was delivered in person. One person said *“It’s not just what you say but how you say it. If it’s something that’s going to negatively affect me then take the time to explain it and what I can do about it. Don’t just send me a text or tell me and then leave straight away.”* This highlights that, while some things might work for some young people, they may not for others. Another said *“When you tell me something important I need time to think about it and then I can respond. It’s a lot to take in. I can’t just give you a response straight away.”*
- A simple thing that was raised by one young person was when staff referred to other staff members involved in their life specifically by name, rather than the service they work for. They said *“It helps when people use the name of the person I’m working with not the name of the service, so like “how are you getting on with Becky, not how are you getting on with Barnardo’s” or whatever it is. It’s more personal and nicer.”*
- Social workers across the board were complemented for their ability to explain things simply so they were easy to understand. This was highlighted as especially important and speaking in short sentences was raised as especially helpful.
- Many children and young people said they felt like only negative things were mentioned in reports and thought more could be done to celebrate the small things. This is an important point and highlights the need to be cognisant of written language as well as spoken. One young person said of their social worker: *“She told me it wasn’t personal, not to take it personally, but it’s about me, it’s my life. It is personal to me”.* It is important to remember that children and young people may want to read their case files – they should be written as if you were talking to them in person – if you would not say it to their face, why are you writing it down?
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# Language and Communication

- In the same theme, many people highlighted the impact of negative language, particularly because it usually comes when they are struggling most. One child said *“Calling me “disengaged” or “underachieving” makes me feel like shit. I’m just struggling and need help, not criticised”*. Another said *“Saying things like “if you don’t settle down or behave you will end up in residential” is really threatening.”*
- Relationships can be hard and take time to form, but many young people highlighted regular check-ins with no pressure helps them feel like someone cares without having to share everything there and then.
- One issue that cropped up many times was report writing. Many complained that their reports were being copied from elsewhere and much of the information was either old or out of date.
- Communication between staff and services is also important. Many children and young people said they had to keep repeating the same things to different people when their story should be contained within their case files. They do not want to have to relive their trauma. One person said *“obviously we get quite a lot of questions that are asked, [...]but see when you’ve been asked it about ten times, you can’t be bothered sitting down saying the same stuff again to somebody”*.
- Staff were also praised for being respectful around days like Mother’s Day & Father’s Day and this was appreciated.

# Language and Communication

## Conclusion

We are cognisant of the pressures on social work staff and others and acknowledge the impact that workload pressures are having on all of us. Considering our language may feel like just one more thing to add to the list of things we are struggling to get done in an ordinary working day. However, even small changes can make a big difference to the lives of care experienced children and young people. Fundamentally, it seems that much of it comes down to a few simple points:

**Respect** – No two young people are the same. Even within the same family, some children will take exception to certain terms or phrases, while others will not have a problem; some children will prefer one method of communication while others will not; and some young people will appreciate “small talk” and regular check-ins while others may be less vocal and are looking for minimal involvement. **The important thing to remember is to listen to people.** If they say something in particular is not working, talk to them and come up with a solution.

**Writing reports** – When writing reports, it can be useful to imagine as though you are writing TO the young person, rather than ABOUT the young person. If a child reviewing their case files is only able to read about the negative aspects of their lives, how do you think this will make them feel? We can be objective and write about the situation, which may be negative, without disparaging the young person.

**Non-stigmatizing language** – One of the most important points raised by the Promise and in the literature was the need for language which identifies strengths and does not stigmatise. Children and young people want to be able to access the support they need and want, without feeling like they are any different from other children and young people in their class at school or that they play with at the weekend.

**Jargon** – Social Work is complicated, and navigating court orders, children’s hearings, and other bits of guidance and reports can be challenging. Jargon is important and helps us to be specific about what we mean. But, it is not always necessary, particularly if you are relaying information to children or young people. It is important to make your language as jargon-free as possible. If you cannot remove some jargon, make sure to give opportunities to ask what different words mean – Children won’t always interrupt to ask!

It is also important to reiterate and further highlight much of the positive feedback that was passed on from young people. Much of the suggestions from the children and young people involved are already being incorporated and this work is to be commended. In particular, young people highlighted that staff were effective in their communicating and helped them to understand things. Language is so engrained in our way of thinking, and it takes a long time to change. We will not get it right all the time but the most important thing is to learn from our mistakes and to listen to what young people tell us.

# Language and Communication

Nonetheless, we should always be striving for better and it is clear that more can be done to improve the experiences of children and young people in care. However, this is not a task for social work staff alone. We have made two key structural recommendations that, if enacted, will have a positive impact on embedding a shift in the use of language, which in turn will help to avoid stigma, build relationships, and enable more effective support.

## Recommendations

The Promise makes clear that everyone has a responsibility to ensure “looked-after” children and young people are able to grow up feeling safe and without stigma. This means everyone has a responsibility to ensure the language they use does not stigmatize care experience. This includes everyone responsible for any aspect of the child’s life including Social Work, Education, Police, Courts, Health staff and Elected Members too. The Promise states *“Fundamentally there must be a shared language of care and approach between services and professionals so that families are not navigating between competing standards and expectations.”* We need to make sure we are all speaking the same language to make it easier than ever for children and young people to understand the system around them.

1. We recommend Stirling Council Social Work Services develops further training across the Service and for external partners, expanding on its work on corporate parenting, to support a shift in the use of language across all of Stirling and Forth Valley.

Written language is just as important as spoken. Just because we are not talking to a child or their family directly, does not mean we can use language they do not like. Children and young people have a right to look at their case files and it is detrimental to relationship building if words or phrases they have stated they do not like, feature in reports, children’s hearings minutes or in other pieces of work. We understand the challenges surrounding this when forms, report templates and other paperwork is regimented and continues to use out of date phraseology.

2. We recommend Stirling Council reviews the language used in paperwork as well as online systems and training. In doing so, we would hope to further embed a shift in language that will help us all in our commitment to #keepthepromise.

# Language and Communication

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