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Merton’s Exploitation language guide 2019 What we have been saying – And what we need to say instead

# Introduction

As Merton continues to find new ways to support young people vulnerable to child sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation, through Direct work and Contextual approaches, we need front line workers, managers, council representatives and partners to confidently and safely identify, assess and respond to children and families in a manner that respects the child’s lived experience .

As part of the Exploitation Action Plan, a Language audit was undertaken of a dip-sample of Merton’s open cases for Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE).

The findings are that in a number of papers, recordings and assessments we have used victim blaming language.

Victim blaming language may reinforce messages from perpetrators around **shame** and **guilt**. This may then prevent the child or young person from engaging with services or trusting professionals. The change in our language helps to shift our thinking from a willing participant to a child or young person who is a victim.

When language reflects the presence of coercion and the lack of control young people and children have in abusive or exploitative situations, this recognises the severity of the impact that exploitation has on the child or young person.

When appropriate language and terminology is used we are recognising the lived experience of the child.

This guide has been created to support staff, practitioners, professionals and partner agencies working with children, families and the community to ensure accurate language is used to speak about, describe and record child vulnerability with specific reference to CSE and CCE. The content has adapted from The Children’s Society’s guidance: Appropriate Language Child Sexual and/or Criminal Exploitation Guidance for Professionals (2018). The guide outlines terms that have been found to be used in Merton and general language that should not be used when discussing or recording Child Sexual Exploitation and Child Criminal Exploitation and includes a list of alternative, appropriately worded phrases and narratives.

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| Inappropriate phrases used in Merton | Appropriate phrases |
| **“She / He is putting themselves in risky situations / putting themselves at risk … Will not recognise/ acknowledge the risk or engage in accepting the risk / remains in contact with/continues to see …”**  *This comment suggests that the child is responsible and to blame for the risk presented by any possible perpetrator and that they are able to make an educated, informed and free choice.* | * The child may have been groomed. * The child is at an increased vulnerability of being abused and/or exploited. * A perpetrator may exploit the child’s increased vulnerability. * The child is not in a protective environment. * The situation reduces the child’s safety. * The location is dangerous to children. * The location/situation could increase the opportunity to abuse them. * It is unclear whether the child is under duress to go missing. * There are concerns that the child may be being sexually abused/exploited. * It is unclear why the child is getting into cars * It is unclear why the child is going to this place or with this person they may be being exploited * There are concerns that there is a power imbalance coercing the child to act in this way. * There are concerns regarding other influences on the child * The child did not feel safe enough to disclose/share any possible abuse/ exploitation * The child appears to fear harmful   repercussions for any disclosure.   * The child is being criminally/ sexually exploited and or groomed and therefore is not able to disclose. * The child sees the relationship to be consensual however the relationship has been made in the context of grooming and exploitation |

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| Inappropriate phrases used in Merton | Appropriate phrases |
| **“Involved in CSE / continues to be involved in CSE / is part of CSE …”**  *This suggests there is a level of choice regarding the child being abused* | * The child is vulnerable to being sexually exploited. * The child is exposed to being sexually exploited * The child is being sexually exploited |
| **“Is missing / Goes missing / is repeatedly missing / regular misper/ is staying at / spending time at /runs away / refuses to stay in placement/ home ….”** | * The child’s safety is environment motivated. * The child does not feel able to stay at their present setting. * The child is being groomed/ coerced to leave. * The child may feel leaving to be their safest option in this situation. * Someone else has control over this child’s actions and behaviours. * The child has returned from a possible unsafe place to a place of safety |
| **“Sexual activity with / Engaging in sex / Engaging in sexually active/ Been sexually active since the age/ is sexually active/ is having a sexual relationship/ has disclosed having sex with another child/engaged in a sexual relationship….”**  *This comment implies that sexual activity is consensual. If the sexual activity occurs within in an abusive , coerced or exploitative situation then this phrase is not correct*  ***A child under 13 cannot consent to sex and therefore is being abused. This must be clear in the language used by professionals*** | * The child has been sexually abused. * The child has been raped / sexually assaulted. * There are reports of sexual abuse. * The child has described sexual activity, however concerns are that the child may have been groomed and/or coerced into sex |

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| Inappropriate phrases used in Merton | Appropriate phrases |
| **“Has been contacting / engages in contact with adult / older males/females by phone and or social media/ …. Has sent nude images to each other, sending indecent images of herself/ himself, engaging in sexualised conversation ….”**  *This suggests that the child or young person is in control for the communication and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context.* | * Adult / older males or females may have been contacting the child. * The child may have been groomed. * There are concerns that an adult or older person is facilitating communication with a child by phone, social media or online. * The child is vulnerable to online perpetrators. * There are concerns that others may be using online technology to contact and or have access to or abuse the child. * Older people and or adults appear to be using a range of approaches to communicate with the child including online , social media and phone contact * This child has been/ is being forced/ pressured into sharing images of themselves online |
| **“Is engaging in sex in return for….perpetrator is offering him/her drugs, alcohol, clothes, food etc in return for sex/ sexual activity / oral sex etc ……exchanging sex for ….”**  *This suggests that the child or young person is responsible for the abuse and a willing exchange has happened. It suggest the child or young person has the ability to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.* | * The child is being sexually exploited. * There are concerns that the child has been raped / sexually assaulted. * Perpetrators/ exploiters are sexually abusing the child. * The child is being sexually abused * The child’s vulnerability regarding drug use, alcohol, need for food, shelter etc. is being used by others to abuse them. * The perpetrators have a hold over the child by the fact that they have a vulnerability regarding drugs, alcohol, food, poverty etc. |
| **“He/she is choosing to do this /this life …”**  *This suggests 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.* | * The child is being criminally exploited. * The child is being sexually exploited * The concerns are repetitive / long term |
| Inappropriate phrases used in Merton | Appropriate phrases |
| **“In a relationship with / is going out with / is “linking” up with… Is going out with / says he/she is Boyfriend/Girlfriend with …”**  *This suggests that the child or young person is in a consensual relationship and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context.*  ***When practitioners have referred to the abuser as the child’s boyfriend or girlfriend* *they have been challenged along with the child in court .This has a very detrimental effect on the case and the child.*** | * The young person says and feels that they are in a relationship with a person, there are concerns about this person’s age, imbalance of power, violence, the control and influence over the young person ,exploitation and/or offending. * The young person has been/is being groomed, exploited and controlled by … * The young person is unable to see the imbalance of power and control in this relationship |
| **Is dressing /acting in a promiscuous way…not dressed appropriately… dressed older than age …**  *Promiscuous is a very judgemental and negative word stereotypes and label. Iit can be interpreted differently by varying professionals.*  ***It isn’t suitable to be used when discussing children and young people, especially if it occurs within an abusive or exploitative context*** | * The child is vulnerable to being sexually exploited. * The child is being sexually exploited. * This child has been /is being forced/ pressured into sharing images of themselves online * Child is encouraged to dress in a manner much older than their age. |
| **Is prostituting themselves/ involved in prostitution ….**  *This suggests that the child or young person is accountable for the abuse and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.*  ***The changes in law mean that child prostitution is no longer an acceptable term and must never be used. Never use the word within assessments or within a child’s case file*** | * The child is vulnerable to being sexually exploited. * The child is being sexually exploited |
| **“Drug running/ dealing, he/she is drug running/going country/running /working for /dealing…….”**  *This suggests 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* | * Child criminal exploitation (CCE). The child is being criminally exploited. * The child is being trafficked for purpose of criminal exploitation. * The child is vulnerable to being criminally exploited. |
| Inappropriate phrases used in Merton | Appropriate phrases |
| **Associating with /spending time with / friends who are in gangs, with ‘elders’/ gang members / older people…..**  *This suggests that the child or young person/people is/ are responsible for their exploitation and have the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.* | * The young people say that they are friends with a person or group of people and there are concerns about the ages of those people, the imbalance of power, exploitation and or offending. * The young people have been groomed, exploited, coerced and/or controlled.   **Note: If the ‘elder’/ gang member is or are also under the age of 18 years old, you will need to consider the language you use in regards to them.** |
| **“Offering him/her drugs / sex/money/ etc seemingly in return for or to run drugs….”**  *This suggests 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 relating to substance use.* | * The child is being sexually/criminally exploited. * The child is being criminally exploited through drug debt. * There are concerns that the child has been raped as they do not have the freedom or capacity to consent. * Perpetrators are sexually abusing the child. * The child is being sexually abused. * The child’s vulnerability regarding drug use is being used by others to abuse them. * The perpetrators have a hold over the child by the fact that they have a drug dependency. |
| **“Is a gang member/ belongs to/ is part of a gang / or affiliated/linked with /to ….”**  *This suggests 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 or powerful grooming process.* | * The child is being sexually/criminally exploited. * The child is at an increased vulnerability of being sexually/ criminally exploited by a number of people/ group of people * There may be detrimental behaviours and or attitudes that exist towards violence and criminality within this peer network. * There are concerns regarding other people having power and control over   **Note: If other members of the peer network are also under the age of 18 years old, this will need to be considered and the language used.** |

USEFUL WEBSITES

National Working Group - <https://www.nwgnetwork.org>

Barnardos - <http://www.barnardos.org.uk/what_we_do/our_work/sexual_exploitation.htm>

CEOP - <http://www.ceop.police.uk/>

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