

# Language Matters



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# HMICFRS Child Exploitation Inspection 2023

**Cause for Concern 3: The force needs to make sure its officers and staff, at all ranks and grades, understand what victim blaming language is and how it affects the service they provide. (Cause of Concern)**

**By 31<sup>st</sup> July 2023, the MPS should make sure that:**

*It provides training and guidance to all officers and staff at all ranks and grades to help them understand victim-blaming language and its effect;*

*Training and guidance include how children are affected by childhood trauma;*

*Officers and staff of all grades and ranks are encouraged to challenge victim-blaming language when they see or hear it; and*

*It has systems in place to carry out regular checks and make sure victim-blaming language is stopped.*

# Why language matters

Language used affects our outlook, behaviours and actions. This in turn influences how we treat victims and also how we engage with victims, investigate crime and missing episodes.

The language we use can reinforce or perpetuate:

- shame or guilt felt by victims
- predator-like attitudes and biases
- barriers to reporting

Academic studies:

- Officer's linguistic choices on charging decision reports can influence the case to a more lenient outcome (Lynn and Canning, 2021)

# The impact of language

## **Influences Professional Perception**

- Leads to unconscious bias, questioning the victim's credibility.
- Shifts focus from perpetrator's actions to victim's behaviour.

## **Reduces Trust and Engagement**

- Victims feel judged, unsupported, and isolated.
- Creates barriers to disclosure and cooperation.

## **Delays Access to Support**

- Professionals may downplay the severity of exploitation.
- Victims face delays in accessing critical services and care.

## **Impacts Recovery Journey**

- Reinforces self-blame and shame in victims.
- Increases mental health challenges, such as trauma and PTSD.

## **Cycle of Harm**

- Enables perpetrators by minimising accountability.
- Risks re-traumatising victims, prolonging exploitation effects.

# A case study - how language can affect the investigative response

15 year old girl in her 4th foster placement is missing for the 3rd time in a week.

IIO states :

*15yo regular misper, leaves care home of her own free will, always returns safe and well having come to no harm. She is believed to be involved in criminality and in CSE / CCE but refuses to disclose anything to professionals.*

Every single review thereafter repeats the above information and in the same language. This language then affects the amount of activity and effort that is being driven to find her whilst she is missing which is limited at best because the overall tone is that she has chosen to leave of her own free will and always returns safe and well.

What is also detailed on the report is the fact that she consistently returns with bruises on her neck, arms and face. She is sometimes seen to get into cars outside the care home with much older men. There are two previous 3rd party allegations of rape that her key worker reported on her behalf that could not be progressed. Other children at the care home are worried she is being forced to deal drugs / store weapons.

This is where language matters.

# A case study - how language can affect the investigative response

The reviews should read:

*15yo girl who is a victim of ongoing child exploitation. The information we hold suggests when she is missing she is at risk of being raped, physically assaulted and being coerced to commit crimes. So far she has been too scared or unable to disclose what is happening to her to professionals. Whilst it may appear she leaves the care home of her own free will it is likely she is in fear of the consequences of not meeting the males seen collecting her.*

***The above pictures paints a picture that is very much high risk and every effort must be made to find her before she comes to further harm.***

The wording is completely different and sets a different tone for the whole approach to this investigation. In this case because a refreshed urgent approach was put in place she was found whilst still missing rather than her returning to the care home before we found her as had been the case previously. When found she was placed in police protection, the males she was found with were arrested for drug related offences and slowly she is starting to describe what had been happening to her.

If we had taken the same approach driven by the language in the reviews above she would have returned to the care home and told staff nothing had happened because she was too scared of the consequences having been subjected to so much harm previously.

# What is Victim Blaming Language and How it Happens

| Title                   | What is it?                                                                                                                                                          | How is this is done?                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Victim Blaming Language | Language or action that implies (whether intentionally or unintentionally) that a person is partially or wholly responsible for the abuse that has happened to them. | A Choice of verb, syntax, or even how details are prioritised in how they are recorded, or what is omitted                                                                             |
| Perpetrator Masking     | Minimising the actions of the offender.                                                                                                                              | Linguistic choices where the offender's actions are backgrounded or their role is minimised: "he has 11 offences against his name" instead of "[name] has 11 convictions for assault". |

# Be SMARTER

- S Survival** (consider what behaviours have been adopted by the victim to survive the abuse)
- M Minimise** (convey **fact** and avoid language that minimises perpetrator behaviour)
- A Active** (use 'active' voice in your reports in relation to perpetrator actions)
- R Reason** (consider who might read it/hear it and the impact the language could have on them)
- T Trauma** (consider victim actions within the context of trauma they are experiencing)
- E Encounter** (when you encounter VBL: address and educate)
- R Recognise** (recognise the power holder in the situation)



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# Active vs Passive Voice

## Passive Voice:

In passive voice, the subject (the victim) is the receiver of the action, and the person responsible for the action (the perpetrator) is less prominent.

Example: *"The victim was punched."*

## Active Voice:

Active voice emphasises the doer of the action, holding the perpetrator accountable.

Example: *"The perpetrator punched the victim."*

## Tips –

### Focus on Who's Doing the Action

Make sure that the person causing harm is clearly identified in the sentence. By putting the person who caused the harm at the centre of the sentence, you ensure that responsibility is clear.

**Passive:** "The victim was attacked by the suspect."

**Active:** "The suspect attacked the victim."

In the active sentence, the attacker is clearly responsible for the harm, rather than the passive sentence, which could make the victim appear like the focus.

### Benefits:

- Clarifies Responsibility
- Promotes Accountability
- Prevents the victim from being seen as complicit or at fault.
- Counters victim-blaming by clearly naming the person causing the harm.

# Why does VBL happen?

- We don't recognise it
- Learned and copied phrases, eg scripts
- Time pressures – writing on “autopilot”, no time to review
- Report writing style – just being factual/objective? Not sure what phrase to use instead
- Accepted workplace norms
- Unlikely the victim will see the report?
- Frustration when we are trying to help someone who cannot engage
- Compassion fatigue?

**Victim blaming is often done unconsciously and does not automatically indicate the presence of victim-blaming ideologies in the author.**

# What have we done?

- Guiding principles for officers to follow
- Glossary of preferred terms and rationale
- LM Champions recruited across organisation
- Trained 6000+ officers focusing on the 'why'
- Trained over 3000 supervisors & seniors leaders
- Regular audits of investigations to assess impact
- LM Reference Group with partners to share practice and learning
- E-learning created for all Met officers & staff

# Common phrases used in relation to Missing Children

## Inappropriate Term

“Returned home safe and well....”

“...regular misper...”  
“... breaches curfew”  
“Comes and goes as he/she pleases”  
“Tends to come back in the morning...”  
“Normal behaviour for him/her/not out of character.”  
“putting themselves at risk”.

## Implication

This minimizes any psychological harm the child might have come to during a missing episode. Does not take account any push/pull factors. Care should be taken not to make assumptions about a person's emotional wellbeing. Instead record any behaviour exhibited by the child on their return along with any known visible signs of injury or distress.

This phrasing is minimizing and potentially mutualises abuse. It suggests a degree of agency whilst not taking account of the context of abuse/exploitation by not addressing *why* the child is experiencing frequent missing episodes. Rather than describing the event solely in relation to the child's agency, consideration of push pull factors and contextual safeguarding concerns would be more appropriate. Consider: there would be no risk were it not for the perpetrator.

## Suggested Alternatives

“[Name] has returned home, care home staff report that they do not have any visible injuries that staff could see at this time- though bruising may not appear until later. [Name] is still in the clothes they were wearing when they left. He/she/they were calm and quiet on their return and appeared withdrawn.”

“The child is regularly reported missing, and it has not always been possible to locate them before they return. There are concerns that this pattern of missing episodes indicates that they are at risk of exploitation.”  
  
“Subject has been missing previously X times in X months”.



# Common phrases used in relation to Criminally Exploited Children

## Inappropriate Term

"Involved in CSE/CCE"

"Engaged in criminality"

"Associates with a gang"

"Drug running"

"working"

"dealing drugs"

## Implication

This mutualising language implies that the child has agency/choice over their abuse. The use of the word "gang" minimizes the harm caused to children by organised crime.

This implies that the child has the capacity to make a free and informed choice without taking account of the exploitative context and abuse.

## Suggested Alternatives

"The child is a victim of exploitation, likely by an organised crime group."

"The suspect(s) are criminally exploiting the child to distribute drugs/hold weapons/store money."

"They are a victim of modern slavery."

"The child is being trafficked for the purpose of criminal exploitation."

"The suspect(s) are criminally exploiting the child to distribute drugs/hold weapons/store money"

# Common phrases used in relation to Sexually Exploited Children

## Inappropriate Term

"In a relationship with..."/  
referring to the perpetrator as a  
"boyfriend girlfriend"

"Consensual sex"

"Actively seeks out adult men"

"sexual activity with..."

"Engaged in sex work"

Referring to the victim as  
"Promiscuous"

## Implication

This implies that the child is in a **legally** consensual relationship and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context including the use of coercion and control by the perpetrator. The use of "mutualising" language and suggestion of agency is not appropriate where the child is being abused.

A victim cannot consent to abuse and be aware about the legal age of consent.

## Suggested Alternatives

"The child 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 has been/is being groomed, exploited, and controlled."

"The perpetrator has manipulated the child to believe they are in a relationship."

# Common phrases used in relation to DA & RASSO

## Inappropriate Term

“Victim refuses to provide a statement/support police.”

“Victim refused to hand over their phone for examination.”

“Victim won’t leave the relationship.”

## Implication

There are many reasons why a victim of crime or exploitation may not be able to engage with services or support a prosecution of their abuser: fear; self-protection tactics; trauma; and lack of trust. Using language that implies the victim has full agency but is refusing to provide the information required does not take account of the context of the abuse. Instead it is important to try to identify barriers and recognise challenges for the victim so that over time they can be broken down

This type of language suggests some fault on the victim or implies there is some blame that lies with them. Be mindful that choice and consent are only true when it is informed and there is no fear or duress involved. Leaving a relationship is often likely to put the victim at increased risk.

## Suggested Alternatives

“Victim has said they will not provide a statement at this time because... In my opinion the victim appeared afraid etc”

“Victim needs phone for contact with children and is unable to hand it in at this time.”

“The relationship remains unchanged with ongoing concerns about domestic abuse.”

“The perpetrator has groomed the victim who now sees them as a person of trust and/or is too fearful or repercussions to engage with police.”



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# Common phrases used in relation to DA & RASSO

## Inappropriate Term

“the victim alleged they were raped”

“the victim has allegedly been assaulted by their partner”

## Implication

‘Allegation’ is a legal term that has its place in the justice system. However, when we record violence against women and girls as having ‘allegedly’ happened, it risks casting doubt on the truth of the report from the beginning. In turn, this could potentially affect the policing response that the report receives. It is during the investigation process that practitioners should take steps to establish whether there is evidence to support the report.

In the event of a burglary, it would usually be recorded that a member of the public ‘reported they were burgled’ rather than ‘alleged they were burgled’. We should adopt a similar approach for violence against women and girls.

‘Reported’ is neutral language that simply means the victim-survivor has informed authorities about the incident.

## Suggested Alternatives

“the victim reported they were raped”

“the victim has reported that they were assaulted by their partner”

# Common phrases used in relation to DA & RASSO

## Inappropriate Term

“the victim’s phone has been seized for download”

“the victim’s bedding has been seized for forensic examination”

“It was a minor argument/injury.”

“It was a low-level assault.”

## Implication

This gives the impression that the items have been taken by force and that the victim is an unwilling participant in this.

This minimises the impact of the abuse on the victim. Instead, be factual to describe the level of injury.  
Also be aware of minimising the impact of verbal abuse which can have a significant psychological impact on victims and contribute to coercive control.

## Suggested Alternatives

“the victim handed over their phone for download”

“The victim allowed police to take their bedding for forensic examination”

“It was an assault with ABH injuries sustained. The victim suffered a 5cm cut below her right eye”

# Addressing Victim-Blaming Language

- Convey fact - Describe what has happened, what the victim said or how many times they have been missing.
- Don't be afraid to quote where this language is used but ensure you state where it has come from - 'the victim stated to police that X is her 'boyfriend', 'the mother of the subject has stated they have been 'hanging out with a bad crowd recently'.
- Challenge stereotypes and assumptions
- Ensure any victim-blaming imbalances are addressed by adding updates – ie. Adding fact and detail to clarify the comments they have made. Instead of 'victim refused to give a statement' add detail such as 'victim has said they will not provide a statement at this time because X'.
- Ensure you speak with person using the language to inform and advise them why the language is victim blaming, the impact it can have and provide alternatives for them to use.
- Provide reassurance to victims that we are here to support them, that they are not to blame for any abuse that has taken place, and record accurately in reports. This is not about being biased towards the victim and their account but providing reassurance and support, then objectively and impartially gathering evidence throughout the investigation.

# What have we learnt

- Many of these phrases are cultural – there will be resistance. Focus on the ‘why’, use lived experiences of victims and give alternatives that are easily accessible when officers need them.
- Be careful how you frame – initially framed as victim blaming language – provoked defensiveness as officers saw their integrity being questioned when much of the problematic language used was unintentional. Re-framing it as ‘Language Matters’ saw much better engagement.
- Keep the conversation going and ensure accountability – local SPOCs to drive this and regular audits of investigations to track progress and provide feedback so that officers don’t fall back into old ways.
- Supervisors are key – both to role model and also picking it up and educating when reviewing reports.
- Much of this language actually started earlier than the crime report with the initial CAD, hence getting buy-in and support from Met CC was essential.
- Some saw this as a hindrance that won’t help them to do their jobs – linking this back to the core mission of policing is important - Trust of victims key. It leads to improved engagement, intelligence, evidence etc, all of which ultimately lead to arresting and successfully prosecuting offenders.

# Further resources



Language Matters  
guidance doc



CCE & CSE case  
study



VBL glossary



VBL Guidance  
aide memoire



Solihull Language  
Matters



VBL training PP  
for BCUs



IOPC-ending-victi  
laming-guidance-F



VBL - a  
ervisors aide mem



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