

Communicate to connect

(Guidance Notes)

What Is “Language That Cares”? And why should we use it?

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1. OPENING THE SESSION

Purpose of today's session

- To explore how our written and spoken language impacts young people.
- To reflect on how our own experiences, assumptions, and window of tolerance affect documentation.
- To strengthen consistency across the team in trauma-informed communication.
- To link caring language directly to:
 - incident reports
 - daily recordings
 - debriefs
 - care plans
 - staff supervision

Suggested script “Today we’re focusing on how we communicate to connect. We already *know* how to build relationships — that’s one of our strengths as a team. What we’re working on is ensuring that this is consistently shown in the paperwork that reflects our practice.”

2. WHY LANGUAGE THAT CARES MATTERS

Key points to discuss

- Records become part of the young person's *life story* — they may read them now or years later.
- Ofsted feedback highlighted a gap between our relational practice and how this appears in documentation.
- Language shapes how young people see themselves: strengths-based = empowering; deficit-based = shaming.
- Professional terminology can feel clinical, judgmental, or blaming unless framed carefully.
- Language is an intervention — it either regulates or dysregulates.

Prompt for staff “How would you feel if something you wrote today was read back to you in 10 years’ time?”

3. REFLECTING ON PERCEPTION VS FACT

Use the examples in the document to facilitate reflection.

Discussion questions

- What makes something a fact?

- When does a statement become an opinion?
- How do tiredness, frustration, or a difficult shift affect the way we write notes?
- Are we describing behaviour, or are we accidentally labelling character?

Activity Share examples:

- “Lindsay was defiant...”
→ Reframe: “Lindsay appeared anxious about upcoming changes and sought reassurance.”

Ask the group to generate their own examples.

4. TRAUMA-INFORMED REFRAMING

Key principles

- Behaviour = communication
- Avoid labels (e.g., defiant, manipulative, rude)
- Prioritise context and emotional meaning (“He may have been overwhelmed...”)
- Ask: *What might the young person be needing, protecting themselves from, or trying to communicate?*

Facilitator question “What trauma-informed meaning might sit underneath the behaviour you saw?”

Useful phrases

- “understandably...”
 - “seeking predictability...”
 - “feeling overwhelmed...”
 - “may have needed reassurance...”
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5. DOCUMENTATION: APPLYING CARING LANGUAGE

Break into sections for clarity.

A. Incident Reports

Remind staff:

- Stick to observable actions (“raised voice”, “paced the room”, “threw cushion”).
- Avoid assumptions (“He tried to manipulate staff”).
- Avoid emotionally loaded descriptions.

- Include the young person's perspective where appropriate.
- Tie actions back to risk assessment/PBS.

Facilitator questions

- "Does this sentence describe what you *saw* — or what you *felt*?"
 - "If the young person read this, how might they feel?"
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B. De-briefs

Core reminders

- Focus on emotional understanding, not blame.
- Validate feelings openly.
- Ensure the child's voice is captured accurately.
- End on strengths and reassurance.

Example language

- "Help me understand how you felt..."
 - "What would have helped you in that moment?"
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C. Daily Records & Care Plans

Prompts

- Are we using strengths-based statements?
- Are we writing *about* the young person as if they were present?
- Does the document show who they are, or only what they do?
- Have we personalised language based on the young person's preferences?

Discuss the Timothy example (with/without caring language).

6. STAFF SUPERVISION CONNECTION

Use the comparison from your document:

"How would you feel if your supervision read:
'YP was disrespectful and rude'"

WELCOME

Research shows that children's voices are rarely or briefly reflected in their own records (The MIRRA (Memory – Identity – Rights in Records – Access) 2019). This system information is much more than just data... it is the child's story, and as such, we owe it to them to write it with them in mind, affording them the due diligence and respect they deserve.

'Language that cares' should be 'caring language'. We are communicating to connect.

- Person-centered: Focused on the young person's strengths, preferences, and individuality.
- Empowering: Encourages autonomy and self-worth.
- Respectful and non-judgmental: Avoids labels or deficit-based language.
- Emotionally attuned: Acknowledges feelings and experiences with empathy.

Why do we use language that carers?

Apart from having unconditional positive regard for the young person, they may want to read their files, now or later. How does what we write make them feel?

Using Caring Language in Care Plans

Why Caring Language Matters

- Shapes how young people see themselves
- Builds trust, safety, and resilience
- Reduces stigma and promotes dignity
- Reinforces the care plan objectives

Core Principles

Use positive, strengths-based language (“You showed courage” instead of “You weren’t scared”)

Validate feelings – acknowledge emotions without judgment

Offer choices to promote independence and control

Be specific with praise (“You tried for 10 minutes”) rather than general (“Good job”)

Model calm, respectful communication – young people mirror staff tone and language

Examples of Caring Language

Instead of: “Stop being difficult.”

Try: “I can see this feels hard for you—let’s work through it together.”

Instead of: “You need to behave.”

Try: “I know you can make a good choice here.”

Instead of: “Don’t be silly.”

Try: “It’s okay to feel unsure—lots of people do in new situations.”

In Practice

- Link strategies with caring language examples
- Write plans as if speaking to the young person directly
- Reflect afterwards: Did my language encourage, reassure, or empower?

Quick Reminders for carers

- Pause before speaking: “How will my words land?”

- Use “I” statements when guiding (e.g., “I will sit with you” rather than commands)
- Celebrate small wins every time
- Remember: language is intervention—it shapes outcomes

Using Caring Language in Incident Reports

Why It Matters

- Incident reports will be read by managers, professionals, Ofsted, and sometimes young people themselves (either now or later).
- Language should remain accurate, respectful, and non-blaming
- Focus on facts, behaviour, and impact — not personal judgments

Core Principles

Stick to facts — what you saw/heard (not assumptions)

Be objective — describe behaviour, not character

Use neutral tone — avoid emotionally loaded words

Show empathy — reflect the young person’s perspective if appropriate

Keep it professional — reports are legal documents

Examples of Language

Instead of: “X was aggressive.”

Try writing: “X shouted loudly, clenched fists, and threw a chair.”

Instead of: “X refused to listen.”

Try writing: “X did not respond when asked to sit down.”

Instead of: “X was being manipulative.”

Try writing: “X asked repeatedly if the carer could change the agreed rule.”

Structure to Follow

1. What happened? (Factual description, sequence of events)
2. What was said/done? (Exact words/actions where possible)
3. How did carers respond? (De-escalation, support given)
4. Outcome/resolution (What happened after? Was the young person safe?)
5. Next steps (Follow-up actions, reflection for staff/team)

Link these to their individual risk assessments and PBS.

Quick Reminders

- Write in past tense
- Use the young person's name or initials (avoid labels)
- Avoid opinion — e.g., “seemed angry” → “raised voice, crying, pacing”
- Remember: the goal is clarity and respect

Using Caring Language in Incident De-Briefs

Why De-briefs Matter

- Helps the young person process what happened
- Builds trust and shows their voice is valued
- Reduces future risk by identifying triggers and better coping strategies
- Promotes recovery and emotional regulation

Core Principles

Create safety first – make sure the young person is calm and ready

Use caring, non-judgemental language

Listen more than you speak – give space for the young person's voice

Focus on learning, not blame

Acknowledge feelings and validate emotions

Examples of Caring Language

Instead of: “Why did you do that?”

Try writing: “Can you help me understand what you were feeling at the time?”

Instead of: “That was unacceptable behaviour.”

Try writing: “That situation was really tough—let's think together about how it could go differently next time.”

Instead of: “You need to calm down.”

Try writing: “I can see you're upset—what would help you feel calmer right now?”

Structure to Follow

1. Check-in – “How are you feeling now?”
2. Explore what happened – invite the young person to share in their own words 3. Reflect on feelings and triggers – validate emotions, identify what led up to the incident
4. Problem-solve together – discuss alternative choices/strategies for the future
5. End positively – highlight strengths, remind them they are supported and valued

Quick Reminders for carers

- Stay calm, patient, and open

- Avoid leading or closed questions
- Use age-appropriate, simple language
- Record the young person's views accurately in the de-brief form
- Always end with reassurance: "We'll work through this together."

Here we have an example of a: Home Care Plan Using Language That Cares
Young Person's Name: Timothy (pseudonym) **Date of Plan:** 01/09/2025

Key Workers: Julia Smith

Placement Goal: To support Timothy in feeling safe, valued, and confident while developing life skills and emotional resilience.

1. Daily Routine

Timothy thrives with a consistent routine that includes time for creativity, movement, and quiet reflection. Carers will gently support Timothy in waking up with encouragement and warmth, offering choices for breakfast and helping Timothy plan their day in a way that feels manageable and positive.

2. Emotional Wellbeing

Timothy has experienced challenges that can sometimes feel overwhelming. Carers will offer a calm, listening presence and validate Timothy's feelings without judgment. Timothy is encouraged to express emotions through art, journaling, or talking with trusted adults. Carers will check in regularly and offer reassurance, especially during transitions or difficult moments.

3. Relationships and Social Life

Timothy values connection but sometimes finds trust difficult. Carers will model respectful communication and gently support Timothy in building friendships at their own pace. Timothy's voice will be central in decisions about contact with family and peers.

4. Education and Aspirations

Timothy is curious and enjoys learning when supported in a way that feels safe and encouraging. Carers will liaise with school to ensure Timothy's strengths are recognised and celebrated. Timothy will be involved in setting goals that reflect their interests and dreams.

5. Health and Safety

Timothy's health needs will be met with dignity and care. Carers will explain medical appointments clearly and involve Timothy in decisions. Safety plans will be cocreated with Timothy, focusing on empowerment rather than control.

Here we have an example of a: Home Care Plan **Without Language That Cares**

Young Person's Name: Timothy (pseudonym)

Date of Plan: 01/09/2025

Key Worker: Julia Smith

Placement Goal: To manage Timothy's behaviour and ensure compliance with house rules.

1. Daily Routine

Timothy must follow the set routine. Carers will wake Timothy at 7:30am and ensure they complete hygiene tasks before breakfast. Non-compliance will be recorded.

2. Emotional Wellbeing

Timothy has emotional issues and may be manipulative. Carers must monitor mood and report any incidents. Timothy is expected to use coping strategies provided.

3. Relationships and Social Life

Timothy struggles with relationships and may be aggressive. Carers must supervise all interactions and restrict contact if necessary.

4. Education and Aspirations

Timothy has poor attendance and lacks motivation. Carers will push Timothy to attend school and complete homework.

5. Health and Safety

Timothy must attend all health appointments. Carers will enforce safety protocols and intervene if Timothy is at risk.

Using language that cares makes a meaningful difference. When it is absent, care plans/documents can feel cold or judgmental, impacting how young people and professionals perceive the support being offered.

Below is an example of:

Why This Care Plan Is Not Useful

Lacks Compassionate Language

The tone is clinical, punitive, and judgmental. Phrases like *"Timothy has emotional issues and may be manipulative"* label the young person negatively, rather than understanding their behaviour as communication or a response to trauma.

Focuses on Control, Not Support

The emphasis is on *compliance*, *enforcement*, and *monitoring*, rather than building trust, safety, and emotional regulation. This can escalate distress and resistance.

No Strengths or Aspirations

Timothy is described only in terms of deficits (e.g., poor attendance, lack of motivation), with no mention of his interests, talents, or goals. This undermines self-esteem and hope.

Fails to Individualise Care

The plan reads like a generic checklist. It doesn't reflect Timothy's unique needs, preferences, or voice. There's no evidence of co-production or meaningful engagement.

Risk-Oriented Rather Than Relationship-Oriented

The plan prioritises risk management over relational connection. Restricting contact and intervening without context can damage trust and attachment.

This is their life and their documentation

Words and phrases Newcastle City Council children and young people tell us they tend to prefer ...but, remember to ask the person you are working with what they wish to be used.

Pathway plan

We prefer: your plan/ preparing for independence/ future planning

Peers

We prefer: people you can talk to/ friends

Permanence

We prefer: being in care until you're an adult/ forever home/ permanent Home

Placement

We prefer: family home/ your home/ where you are living/ where you live/ home

Moving placements

We prefer: moving house

Leaving care

We prefer: leaving/moving out/ leaving home

Risk

We prefer: Not safe/Need protecting/help to keep us safe

Restrained

We prefer: protecting someone from harm/stopping from harming anyone or yourself/holding

Summary

Clear, straightforward, and understandable

Ask the child or young person what words they prefer to be used

Respect what the child or young person says by using their chosen words

Explain official words that need to be used so everyone understands their meaning

Support and challenge other professionals to use language that cares

Guidance and tools to help carers reflect and document their work in a trauma-informed manner. I have issued a handout for all homes to laminate and display in the office...

Reading List: Language That Cares & Trauma-Informed Communication

This reading list includes books and guides focused on using language that cares and trauma-informed communication in children's residential care. These resources are ideal for professionals seeking to promote dignity, emotional safety, and empowerment.

Language That Cares - TACT Fostering

A co-produced guide with care-experienced children and young people. Offers alternatives to stigmatizing terms.

https://tactfostering.org.uk/content/uploads/2019/03/TACT-Language-that-cares2019_online.pdf

NSCCS Language That Cares Guide (2024)

Supports children, families, and professionals in using empowering language with practical examples.

<https://nsscp.co.uk/sites/default/files/2025-04/NSCCS%20Language%20that%20Cares%20Guide%20-%20August%202024.pdf>

SCRA's Language That Cares Guide - Keeping The Promise

Focuses on respectful, inclusive language in children's hearings and social care settings.

<https://www.scra.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Keeping-The-Promise-SCRAsLanguage-that-Cares-Guide.pdf>

Durham SCP Language That Cares Guide

Offers practical language swaps and insights into how children interpret professional terminology. [https://durham-](https://durham-scp.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2024/06/LanguageThatCaresGuide.pdf)

[scp.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2024/06/LanguageThatCaresGuide.pdf](https://durham-scp.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2024/06/LanguageThatCaresGuide.pdf)

Appropriate Language Use in Trauma Guide - Violence Reduction Alliance

Includes validating phrases, language that promotes safety and trust, and cultural sensitivity.

<https://violencereductionalliance.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Appropriate-LanguageUse-in-Trauma-Guide.pdf>

[Van der Kolk, B. \(2015\). *The body keeps the score: brain, mind and body in the healing of trauma*. New York: Penguin Books.](#)

Bruce Duncan Perry and Szalavitz, M. (2008). The boy who was raised as a dog : and other stories from a child psychiatrist's notebook : what traumatized children can teach us about loss, love, and healing. New York: Basic Books.

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