

## *Communication – Context - Curiosity*

### **Why This Matters**

Learning from local and national safeguarding reviews has highlighted that professionals sometimes use ambiguous or practice-specific language that is interpreted differently across agencies. Terms such as “mild”, “moderate” or “severe” are often used without a shared definition, which can result in misunderstanding of risk, need, or impact, particularly across health, education, social care and voluntary sector settings.

For example, describing a child as having a “mild learning disability” or a parent as having “severe mental health needs” may lead different professionals to make very different assumptions about functioning, support needs or safeguarding risk if this language is not clearly explained.

**Avoiding ambiguous language is vital to ensure partners share appropriate understanding of need, risk and vulnerability, and respond in a way that is child-centred and effective.**

### **Instead of / Consider Saying**

Instead of: “**Mild** learning disability” consider saying: “Has a learning disability and needs support with understanding written information, managing appointments, and expressing worries.”

Instead of: “**Severe** autism” consider saying: “Is autistic and currently finds change, busy environments and unfamiliar people very distressing, which affects school attendance and communication with professionals.”

Instead of: “**Low-level** neglect” consider saying: “There are ongoing concerns about hygiene, food availability and supervision, which are impacting the child’s health and school attendance.”

Instead of: “**Complex** family” consider saying: “The family is experiencing multiple pressures, including housing instability, parental mental health difficulties and financial hardship, which are affecting parenting capacity.”

Instead of: “Parent is **non-compliant**” consider saying: “The parent has not attended appointments; it is unclear whether this is due to understanding, access, confidence or other barriers.”

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#### **Practice Expectation**

Descriptive terms should always be accompanied by an explanation of what this means for the child or family in day-to-day life.

This includes describing:

- How the child or adult functions
- What support is needed
- What impact this has on safety, wellbeing or development
- Any barriers to engagement with services

**It is easy to fall back on familiar language or professional terminology but understanding the recipient's needs is essential for effective communication.**

#### **Useful Resources and Further Support**

Professionals are encouraged to use the following resources to support clear, inclusive and accessible communication::

- NSCP Resource Library – including the [Pocket Guides](#), Levels of Need guidance and supporting tools such as [Learning Difficulty and Disability Guidance](#).
- [NSCP Bulletins](#) – for updates, practice guidance and learning from reviews.
- [NHS England: Making information and the words we use accessible](#) – national principles on inclusive language, avoiding jargon and explaining impact in plain language.
- MASH Advice Line – for advice where there is uncertainty about thresholds, risk or how concerns are being described - 0191 277 2500.
- Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) and Professional Networks – which provide opportunities to discuss shared language and expectations across agencies..

#### **Key Messages to Remember**

Communication is only effective when the message is understood. Partners sharing information need to ensure the person receiving will be able respond proportionately and effectively.

- Communicating clearly is essential to safeguarding
- Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility
- When in doubt, discuss and share concerns