

# LANGUAGE THAT CARES



Northumberland  
County Council

# LANGUAGE THAT CARES

## Welcome

This is an area that I am passionate about and one that everyone should take note of, reflect on and implement what our children and young people have told us. Our words and our language matter, what we write and what we say has an impact and ripples through our children and young people's lives. This guide has been produced through work with our children and young people, they have told us the words that they find positive when we talk and write about them and they have also told us about the ones which offend, which can bring about feelings of shame and which can often stigmatise and label them. Everyone who works with children and young people, should take the time to digest this guide and make every effort to alter what they say and what they write to language that does care and that shows respect and love for them.



**Vicky McLeod**  
**Director for Children, Young**  
**People and Families**

Children in Northumberland have asked that we use the term **Cared for Children** instead of Looked After Children.



# LANGUAGE THAT CARES

Our Cared for Children Council – Voices Making Choices - have set up a campaign called **‘Treat Us the Same.’**



“Communication in the care system is so important.”

Language is powerful – it influences the way we think and see the world. Used negatively, language can stigmatise, offend and blame.

“Language can cause a lot of stigma but is something we can all change.”

By changing the language we use we can positively impact attitudes, actions and culture.





“We would like to be treated with compassion, understanding and care, just like every child and young person, we want to hear phrases that we understand.”

Using more accessible language is better for all children and adults so will bring an improved experience for everyone.



“We want you to treat us and talk to us like you would your own children.”



We also need to avoid professional jargon. When it comes to acronyms, it is worth taking the time to name something rather than shortening it.

“Use of jargon can make us feel confused, worried and embarrassed.”

## More to think about...

- We can't ignore things that are worrying or troubling but we can change how we talk about them. Being curious about behaviour and seeing it as a form of communication can help lead us to a better understanding and untapped solutions.
- We are only human and change is hard. It's okay to get things wrong as long as we are willing to reflect and stand corrected. This guidance gives us permission to challenge each other respectfully, professionally and elegantly.
- We recognise the need to review this guide every few years as language changes over time.

# Words from Children



Children and young people in Northumberland were asked for their views and were keen to give alternative words and phrases that they all feel are a more caring use of language.

Words used	Reflection	Just say
LAC (looked after child)	Aren't all children meant to be looked after? Why make us feel even more different, we don't want to be known as lacking something.	Call us by our name.
Stat visit	What does that even mean?	You are coming to see how I am doing. I am visiting.
Placement	The word doesn't sound permanent, it's not very homely. It's where I live, it's not a placement, it's my home.	Home, house, where I live.
Contact	You wouldn't say you're going on contact when you meet your mam, dad or family member.	Seeing family, family time.
Designated teacher	The word is too obvious, we don't want everyone knowing.	It's a teacher we can talk to who is trained and who attends our reviews.
PEP	Some teachers openly announce in class that the LAC student has a PEP meeting.	School review, education meeting, education plan.
Challenging behaviour	Young people who are finding coping tough are not 'challenging', they are in need of your help and support.	Having trouble coping, distressed feelings.
Peers	That's not a word a child uses and I heard it all the time in the children's home.	Call them friends, mates, kids.

# Words from Adults

“We would like to ask any adult working with us to think about the words and phrases they use”.



In Northumberland we believe that the language used needs to be individualised – there is no one way of using language that fits everyone. Language also needs to be contextualised, reframing language to reflect fact rather than feeling. For some terms it's not about swapping one word for another, it's about doing the difficult thing and changing how we structure the sentence. If in doubt, ask the individual which words they prefer.

## Words used

## Rethink and Reframe

### **Absconding**

This is a very formal sounding word that doesn't tell us what actually happened. It implies the child is at fault or that they are not worth finding or supporting.

This is likely the child's flight response being activated. You could describe exactly what happened. e.g. “the child left home / school and we didn't know where they were” and then analyse the push and pull factors.

### **Aggressive, Disruptive, Meltdown, Kicking off**

All of these terms have negative connotations that do not consider the child's point of view. These terms negatively label a child and hinder us from being curious about why they might be using physical or verbal behaviours. They also encourage an unhelpful fear response from adults.

Children who have been hurt can often be quick to move into a fight survival response, either to feel safe or to manage interactions. Seeing physical behaviour as a protective behaviour due to fear can help us think about how we can help a child to feel safe. You could say, “the child is in distress,” making you more likely to want to support, comfort and find solutions.

### **Attention Seeking**

Attention seeking is a term that has become increasingly negative over time. It shames the child by implying that seeking a connection is bad and treats the child's behaviours as an annoyance.

Part of a child's survival mechanism could be to make sure they are being noticed by adults in order to be kept safe. You could say “the child is connection seeking, care seeking or seeking reassurance” which immediately tells us what the child needs.

## Words used

## Rethink and Reframe

### **Defiant, Refusal**

These terms make it sound like the child is making a deliberate choice to defy or refuse. It suggests the child is being difficult by not fitting into our preference for how things are done.

These could be defensive responses to a perceived threat, using refusal as a communication strategy when feeling unsafe, anxious, overwhelmed or misunderstood. Underneath there could be fear, a need for control or a lack of trust. You could say, “the child wasn’t able to...” How can the child be supported to feel safe, calm and trust others?

### **Disengaged, Did not engage, Hard to Engage**

This suggests that the young person has failed to meet our agenda without acknowledging their experience.

Is it a choice? What things do we see as being a signal of disengagement? Freeze / flop? The child may find it difficult to trust adults as they have learnt from past experiences to be wary. If we reframe this as ‘we have struggled to engage the child’ it puts the onus on us to find new ways with which to engage them. You could say, “I have not engaged the child yet”.

### **Manipulative, Controlling**

These terms give the illusion that the behaviour is a choice with intent. They are shaming and blaming of the child.

Children try to take control of situations in order to get a predictable and expected outcome. It could be a survival strategy to get their needs met in a way that has worked for them in other environments in the past. You could say, “the child needs things to be a certain way / to feel in control so they feel safe.” If we see the behaviours as goal orientated we can try to figure out what their unmet needs are, what they are trying to avoid or achieve.

### **Naughty**

Naughty is a vague, negative, subjective label implying intent and choice. It is one that is likely to stick to the child for a long time and unhelpfully influence the interpretation of future behaviours.

You could describe the observed behaviours without making assumptions, e.g. the child often swings on their chair and shouts out during lessons. The child is likely trying to communicate an unmet need.

### **Risk taking behaviour, Putting themselves at risk**

These terms imply the young person is complicit or responsible for the risks they are facing, suggesting free and informed decision making.

Depending on the behaviour, it could be demonising risk when risk isn’t always a bad thing and can be a normal part of adolescence. It could, however, be that the child is being exploited or harmed. It is best to describe the actual behaviour being observed e.g. “the child has been jumping off garages” leading to a discussion about how to help a child to manage risk in ways that are safe.

