THE LANGUAGE OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Like many other sectors, children's services use a lot of jargon but there is concern some common terms risk stigmatising children, young people and families. *Charlotte Goddard* investigates

The language used by professionals and policymakers to describe children and young people can have a big impact. Already there are concerns some phrases that have become commonplace during the Covid-19 pandemic are potentially "hugely damaging to young people".

This was the message from government-appointed youth mental health ambassador Dr Alex George who warned MPs of the dangers of bandying around terms like "lost generation" and "catch up".

He told an education select committee meeting in March he had received messages from concerned young people asking: "Am I part of this lost generation?"

A survey on public attitudes to children in care carried out in March for children's charity Coram found the first words that sprang to mind were negative terms including "sad", "poor" and "vulnerable".

Feedback from children and young people shows many words and phrases commonly used across children's services can be alienating and stigmatising.

The recent Scottish Care Review found terms used by the workforce to describe the lives of care-experienced children increased their sense of being different from other children.

Research also shows language used by professionals and policymakers can frame their thinking about young people, defining them by the challenges they face rather than treating them as individuals.

Gillian Ruch, professor of social work at the University of Sussex, is part of Talking and Listening to Children, a project exploring how social workers communicate with children.

"The overarching message was that every child is an individual and so that's how we must think and talk about them, rather than reducing down to labels," she says.

Professional language allows practitioners to create emotional distance from distressing situations, but jargon can create barriers between professionals and those they are trying to support.

"If children, young people, parents and carers are left confused by who we are, what our purpose is, and what we are doing because of unclear language it can leave them feeling frustrated, angry and upset," says British Association of Social Workers (BASW) professional officer Gavin Moorghen.

Care-experienced people often return to their care records to help them make sense of their lives, and negative and judgmental language used there can reinforce the biases and prejudices the person experienced as a child. "I recently spoke to an adult who was in care for most of her childhood and the negative language used to describe her as a five-year-old in her case records was deeply upsetting: 'Dirty, unkempt, smelly, uncontrollable and of no particular talent'," says Moorghen.

There are ongoing efforts within the sector to change and challenge use of certain terms.

BASW England's 80-20 campaign made the case for jargon-free language and language

We are all 'disabled' in one way or another

Zach Opere-Onguende, 21

I was born with cerebral palsy. I'll never forget the words of the physiotherapist I saw when I was eight years old. He had asked me what I wanted to be, and I told him I just wanted to be normal. "You'll never be normal," he replied.

His words would be enough to crush any kid's spirit. In his eyes I was disabled, and always would be.

At first it made me angry but, luckily, I have a very supportive family who have always encouraged me to focus on the potential of my mind, rather than the weakness in my legs.

The label "disabled" feels wrong to me. The way I see it is that we are all disabled in one way or another. No one can do everything and no one is perfect. We're all faulty.

So, I separate out my life. On the one side is the disabled person – with everything the outside world hangs on that peg. Then there's the real me – Zach.

I've seen so many doctors, surgeons, social workers and therapists over the years. I don't think they always appreciate how words can hurt you. I've been told I don't think like other people with "special needs". I wonder if any of us think the same?

I've always seen my cerebral palsy as an opportunity, a chance to show other people what you can achieve if you put your mind to it. People are always surprised when they hear I am studying for a degree in performing arts. Or that a song I created featured on the BBC on Remembrance Day.
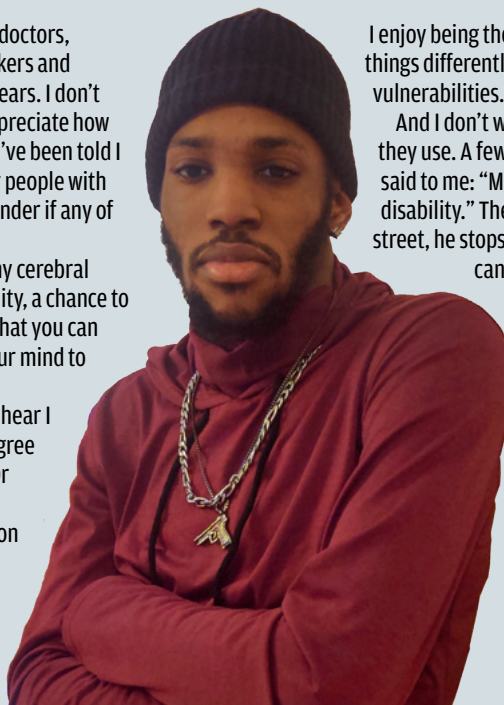
I enjoy being the light that helps people see things differently. But I'm honest about my vulnerabilities.

And I don't write people off for the language they use. A few years back, a guy in a park once said to me: "Move or you'll give me your disability." These days, if he sees me in the street, he stops to offer me a lift. Everyone can change for the better.

● *Zach is a member of the FLARE young people's advisory group set up as part of the Making Participation Work programme for children and young people with disabilities and special educational needs.*
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which is respectful of children and families. This included producing a "top tips" guide to better recording in children's social work.

Meanwhile fostering charity Tact worked with care-experienced children and young people to produce Language that Cares, a glossary that aims to change the language of the care system. The organisation is currently working with young people to develop a new multimedia version.

"Local authorities are developing their own glossaries based on our work," says Sara Ortiz, senior research and policy adviser at Tact.

Brighton & Hove City Council has made its recording systems more child-centred, renaming its looked-after child reviews – often simply referred to as LAC reviews within the sector – as "Me and My World" reviews. Social workers are encouraged to write in the first person, addressing the child directly, and explain professional terms like "PEP" – personal education plan – and "virtual school".

"There was concern about what Ofsted would make of it and also how could we do this and at the same time evidence our key performance indicators," says Rebecca Watts, lead practitioner at Brighton & Hove children's social work service. In fact Ofsted praised the "child-friendly language", which inspectors said made "complex issues easy to understand."

Reflect normal discourse

The Scottish Care Review concluded the language of family support must reflect normal discourse, and not be hidden behind professional terms such "LAC reviews" and "risk assessment." Many hope England's recently announced independent care review will follow Scotland's lead but there are doubts it will dig deep into the issues.

"I would be surprised if the forthcoming review had the time, resource or the level of engagement with young people to get heavily involved in the debate about language to any significant degree," says retired social worker Ian Dickson, who is care-experienced himself and campaigns for the voice of children in care to be heard.

It is clear that when talking or writing about children and families it is important to choose language carefully. But is there a place for shortcuts when professionals are talking to each other?

"I have to admit that I have used jargon to get points across to colleagues quickly," says BASW's Gavin Moorghen. However, he says this can exclude new starters who might not feel confident asking for explanations of terminology, and can cause misunderstandings when the same term is used differently by different professionals.

In one child safeguarding role he held, managers attempted to move away from jargon altogether. "Initially it took time for us

Organisations and councils have developed jargon-busting guides to change the language of the care system

to get used to this new approach to language but in a very short space of time we became accustomed to it and it meant we did not find ourselves having to explain jargon or fix misunderstandings in language," he says.

Language evolves very quickly, and children's services professionals may find it difficult to stay up to date. Michael Surr, education officer at the National Association for Special Educational Needs (Nasen), recommends asking the person concerned about their preference or checking on the website of an organisation serving that particular group. Crucially, professionals should be open to being corrected. "Be open and honest and say 'I'm not sure how to phrase this so you are comfortable with it – I would

say "x" but do you prefer something else?'" he says.

While language is important, new words make no difference if the thinking behind them doesn't change, says Ian Dickson. "I found in my career that it was not words that got in the way of understanding or forming relationships – it was people who lacked insight and empathy," he concludes.

Right: Michael Surr

The role of the media

When I first began writing about children's services nearly 20 years ago, one of the first things to get to grips with was the dizzying array of acronyms and initialisms used in the sector. Children in care became LACs (looked-after children), social workers were QSWs (the "q" indicating they were professionally qualified) and local authorities abbreviated to LAs, to name but a few.

Part of writing for a professional audience is to understand the language your readers use. This helps gain you - and your publication - credibility and helps to accurately reflect the views of the sector. Before you know it, you begin adopting the language of the sector to the point where you check yourself to ensure you still explain what an acronym or expression means to an uninitiated reader.

Using "sector-speak" is not just useful for demonstrating a journalist's knowledge but is also a device for saving space - on page, Neet is easier to read than using "not in education, employment or training" umpteen times; the same applies to the use of the term SEND (special educational needs and disabilities).

Responding to change

All this rings as true now as it did 20 years ago. However, we are constantly reminded that times change and we need to respond accordingly. The decades-used language of acronyms and labels describing children and young people from certain groups or with particular needs looks increasingly cold and out of step with the societal norms of today.

The advent of the term "care experience" in recent years is an example of how language is evolving from the grassroots upwards. In Tameside the Children in Care Council told the authority that they want to be referred to as "cared-for children" instead of children in care, a subtle but important change that has been agreed to by councillors.

We will almost certainly see other councils follow suit. Other initiatives like Coram's "Story of Care Ambassadors" are helping to highlight the negative language used in the media generally to portray care-experienced children. Referring to "troubled" or "unloved" children reinforces negative stereotypes that can influence the wider political and social narrative.

For those in the media, the inevitable question arises as to whether we reflect these changes by gradually adapting our language or take a more pro-active stance by speeding up the process of change.

● *Derren Hayes is editor of* Children & Young People Now

GLOSSARY OF SECTOR

BAME The charity UK Youth says the term BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) homogenises young people from ethnic minority backgrounds as if they're all the same and have the same lived experiences. "Those from supposed ethnic minorities don't refer to themselves amongst their peers as 'BAME' – it can feel lazy and dismissive," says communications manager Georgia Morian. Government research has also found BAME and BME to be problematic terms, partly because they include some groups and not others and partly due to the fact the acronyms BAME and BME were not generally that well understood.

Challenging Behaviour "Challenging behaviour" was introduced to replace words like "abnormal", "disordered", "problem" or "maladaptive", recognising the behaviour described was often an understandable response to a set of circumstances. The new phrase was intended to stop professionals, staff and policymakers feeling they needed to "fix" the person, so they would instead concentrate on "fixing" the environment.

However, there is concern the phrase may be unhelpful. Frequent use of personal pronouns and verbs – as in "his challenging behaviour" or "she has challenging behaviour" – imply the problem is within the person rather than being the result of an interaction between the person and their environment. Some prefer to use the phrase "behaviour that challenges" . Tact suggests "having trouble coping", "distressed feelings", "different thinking method" and "difficult thoughts".

Child/young person Whether to refer to someone as a child or a young person tends to vary by sector, which makes it tricky when professionals from different agencies are working together. Older children generally prefer to be called young people, and youth workers usually work with "young people" between the ages of 11 and 25. In the health sector, General Medical Council guidance recommends the use of the word "children" to refer to younger children who do not have the maturity and understanding to make important decisions for themselves, and "young people" to refer to older or more experienced children who are more likely to be able to make these decisions for themselves.

The youth justice sector however is very definite that the young people they work with should be referred to as "children". "As you get to a certain age children want to be referred to as young people, but under criminal law you are a child until you're 18," says Celine Gafos, service manager at Knowsley Youth Offending Service. "Research indicates that the average person doesn't fully develop their risk assessment skills until they are 25 and the danger is that referring to a child as a young person within the criminal justice system assumes a level of maturity and a higher level of functioning."

Contact Care-experienced children and young people say the word "contact" makes them feel different from their friends. "Contact should be changed to meeting with friends and family," said one who took part in Tact's Language that Cares project, while another said: "I would prefer 'seeing family'. Seeing family is normal for anyone but 'contact' makes it sound like it's not normal." "We try to get away from the word 'contact' and use 'time with family'," says Brighton & Hove social worker Rebecca Watts. The Scottish Care Review also called for children's services to stop using the word. "Children must not be told they are going for 'contact' when they see their mum or dad," it concluded. "This use of disrespectful language can lead to low self-esteem and compounds a self-stigmatisation as children realise that their peers do not use this type of language."

Mum/Dad Professionals often refer to parents as "mum" or "dad" when speaking to them directly or when speaking or writing about them. It is not only something that many parents find annoying, it can also be perceived as disempowering, and failing to recognise the expertise they have on their child. "They are mum or dad but they're a person as well," says Nasen's Michael Surr. "You wouldn't say, 'let's ask teaching assistant' or 'let's ask educational psychologist', you would use their name." Some parents don't mind, but as in so many cases, it is best to ask them how they would like to be addressed.

Peers Ashleigh, a care-experienced young person involved in Tact's Language that Cares glossary, says the word "peers" should be changed to "friends". "When I was a child, my social worker would always call my friends 'peers', but I didn't really know what peers were at the time, and I'd never really heard anyone use that word before," he says.

Respite The Scottish Care Review found this was another word that makes something common to many

TERMS OPEN TO DEBATE

children – going to stay with a relative or family friend while parents have a break – into something different. The word "respite" is also stigmatising to the child, with one of its dictionary definitions being "a short period of rest or relief from something difficult or unpleasant". Try using "going to stay with 'x'".

SEND child Using "SEND" – referring to special educational needs and disabilities – as an adjective falls into the trap of defining people by their special need or disability. Instead, refer to young people with special educational needs or disabilities as "young people with SEND", says Michael Surr. "By saying 'SEND children' you're making them into a marginalised group, and they're not, they're all individuals," he says. "You're defining the young person by one aspect of their being. They are more than their special need or disability." Professionals should default to putting the child or young person before their disability or condition but it is important to be open-minded. "Just ask the young people themselves – what do you like to be called by us?" says Surr. "A lot of autistic people, for example, feel that it's fine to say autistic, rather than a person with autism."

Toxic trio The term "toxic trio" is often used to describe the issues of domestic abuse, mental ill health and substance misuse, seen as key indicators of increased risk of harm to children and young people when they occur together. However the Living Assessments research programme, funded by the Wellcome Trust in partnership with the Universities of Cambridge and Kent and the National Children's Bureau (NCB), found little evidence to support a focus on the combined effect of these indicators to the exclusion of other factors. In addition, parents told researchers the term is "stigmatising, offensive and alienating" says Dustin Hutchinson, NCB senior research and policy analyst. "Families told us to avoid the term 'toxic trio' even in research or professional

Right: Dustin Hutchinson

conversations," he says. Instead of generalisations and the assumptions they carry, practitioners should describe in plain terms what is actually happening in a family, he says.

Vulnerable "Vulnerable" was used by the government to define the group of children, in addition to children of key workers, who could carry on attending school under lockdown: children with a social worker or an education, health and care plan. However the Living Assessments research has found the catch-all term has caused concern among young people, who say the word is too widely used and not sufficiently well-defined. In this context "vulnerable" means young people who benefit most from attending school, but the word also has health implications that can increase anxiety. "The language used to describe young people can

affect their wellbeing," says Hutchinson. "Being labelled as vulnerable can make them feel vulnerable. It was understandable that the government had to act quickly during the pandemic but as things progress it is important we reflect on that use of language." Young people taking part in the research did not suggest an alternative but wanted a dialogue or discussion about what the vulnerable label means, and whether it was referring to physically or emotionally vulnerable.

Youth violence Instead of talking about "youth violence", UK Youth prefers the term "violence affecting young people". "The former puts the emphasis on young people as perpetrators but violence is actually a much wider topic affecting all different ages," explains director of external affairs Kayleigh Wainwright.

Being told I'm 'inspiring' is annoying

Carys Hoggan, 17

Who are you? It's often a difficult question to answer, I know. Fortunately for me, I've known who I am for a while. If the labels given to me by professionals are anything to go by, I'm "disadvantaged" or "vulnerable".

Teachers and health professionals have given me these labels for longer than I'd care to remember. For them, I fit into two categories: I'm disabled but, because I manage to do things, I'm also "inspiring" as I "persevere" despite "all the obstacles".

Despite being well-intentioned, I can't quite express how deeply annoying these words are. They label me before I'm able to show what I'm capable of and categorise me as an object of pity or someone to play the perfect role in their "inspiration narrative".

The language used concerning people with disabilities is important as it can often contribute to a young person's self image, creating a distorted view of themselves and sometimes leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy. As a result, professionals should think more carefully about the words used about young people both to them and about them, in order to contribute to breaking down stigma and stereotypes surrounding those with additional needs.

So how can professionals avoid using language that makes an individual feel stigmatised?

Think behind the implications of the words and how it might make someone feel. "Disadvantaged" gives the impression that being disabled is always a bad thing and is, in a way, a reminder of the discrimination many of us have faced. It is

discrimination that disadvantages us rather than our disabilities.

"Vulnerable" suggests powerlessness. "Inspiring" implies that all disabilities are negative things and people who "overcome" them are heroes rather than humans.

Although language is only changing things on a superficial level, it is a step towards a better and more equal society and helps people carve out their own identities and defy the labels they're often forced to wear.

I am someone. I am someone who is always willing to debate or listen. I am someone who loves nothing more than reading and learning or stepping out on stage and feeling the heat of the spotlight upon me.

You could say I am someone with a disability. But I am not "disadvantaged", I am not "vulnerable" and there is nothing "wrong with me". I'm Carys and I'm going to carve out my own identity.

● *Carys is a member of the FLARE young people's advisory group set up as part of the Making Participation Work programme for children and young people with disabilities and special educational needs.*
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