

Victim Blaming Language

7. Further Information and Resources

Further information and guidance can be found in the resources below:

- [The Children's Society Appropriate Language: Child Exploitation guidance.](#)
- [NSPCC: Why Language Matters](#)
- [Barnardo's Language Matters materials](#)
- [NWG: Making Words Matter](#)
- [IOPC-ending-victim-blaming-guidance-Feb-2024.pdf](#)
- [Why language matters – raising awareness of the use of victim blaming language | College of Policing](#)

6. Good Practice in Recording and Reporting

- Use the victim's own words exactly as spoken.
- Describe clearly who is causing the harm, what they are doing, and how control or coercion is being used.
- Avoid language that suggests choice, consent, provocation or mutual responsibility.
- Supervisors should routinely review and challenge harmful phrasing.
- All agencies should use consistent, non-blaming language so that accountability remains with the person causing harm.

5. Common Victim-Blaming Phrases — And Better Alternatives continued

- Instead of saying "She's 15 and has a 30 year old boyfriend", record accurately:
"A 15 year old child is being sexually abused by a 30 year old adult." This makes clear the criminal nature of the relationship.
- Instead of "She keeps going back to him", reflect the dynamics of abuse:
"The perpetrator is continuing a pattern of coercive control, and she is experiencing pressures and fear that affect her ability to leave." This recognises the impact of control, not choice.
- Instead of "He should have fought back", avoid assumptions about resistance:
"The perpetrator used violence and control, and he was unable to safely defend himself." This removes blame and avoids harmful stereotypes about male victims.
- Instead of "She went home with him / she'd been drinking", describe the harm clearly:
"The perpetrator sexually assaulted her. Alcohol or location do not imply consent." This prevents assigning responsibility to the victim.



1. What do we mean by victim blaming language?

Victim-blaming language refers to words or phrases that imply a person — child or adult — is responsible for the abuse, violence or control they are experiencing. This occurs in spoken interactions, case notes, assessments, referrals and reports. Victim-blaming language shifts responsibility away from those choosing to cause harm and onto the person being harmed. Abuse is always caused by the perpetrator, whether it happens within intimate relationships, families, peer groups, online spaces or the community.

Language evolves, and some phrases previously seen as "neutral" can now be understood to reinforce harmful narratives. Professionals therefore have a responsibility to use language that is respectful, accurate and centred on the behaviour of the person causing harm — not the victim.

2. Why Does Language Matter?

The words professionals use influence how victims understand their own experiences and how services respond. Victim-blaming language can:

- Reinforce messages used by perpetrators (e.g., "It's your fault", "You made me angry").
- Increase feelings of shame, fear, guilt or self-blame, making it harder to seek help.
- Normalise or minimise abusive behaviours, resulting in weaker safeguarding or criminal justice responses.
- Undermine investigations, as victim-blaming terminology in files may be used by the defence to challenge credibility.

Clear, non-blaming language ensures accountability stays with those causing the harm.

4. Common Victim-Blaming Phrases — And Better Alternatives

Below are examples of phrasing frequently identified and why we must avoid them, followed by improved ways to describe the situation without assigning blame.

- Instead of saying a child is "putting themselves at risk", describe what is actually happening:
"The child is being exposed to risk in this environment, where adults or peers are creating unsafe conditions." This acknowledges the external cause of harm rather than attributing the behaviour to the child.
- Instead of "He's drug running", describe what is happening:
"The child is being criminally exploited and directed to transport or supply drugs." This acknowledges coercion and removes implication of willing participation.

3. The Context: Abuse is rooted in power and control

Whether the harm occurs inside or outside the home, abuse is never the victim's responsibility. Domestic abuse, coercive control, sexual violence and exploitation all involve manipulation, intimidation, fear, dependency, isolation or grooming. Victims may:

- Feel love, loyalty, fear, shame or financial dependence.
- Minimise or not recognise the abuse because it has developed gradually.
- Be pressured, threatened, or controlled by the perpetrator in ways that restrict their choices.

Acknowledging these dynamics helps prevent language that implies that a victim "chose" the situation they are in.