

LEADERSHIP

Reshape the language of care

Some of the language used by professionals can leave young people feeling confused and disempowered, so take a more compassionate and inclusive approach to communication to build stronger relationships



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Nelson Mandela once said: “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.”

When we make the effort to speak someone else’s language, we are not just making a communicative effort, we are making a caring effort. We are saying: “It is important that you and I are able to understand each other. I am putting myself out of my comfort zone because I believe in building a relationship with you.”

When we take an attentive approach towards language in the care system, we are saying to children and young people that we care about them – not because of our corporate parent duties, but because we recognise them as individuals who deserve compassion and respect and want to build positive relationships with them.

Last year, TACT came together with local authorities and other organisations to examine how we communicate with children and young people. We sat down with young people in care and care leavers and listened to what they had to say about the language that is used day to day with them and about them and how it makes them feel. We heard how some terms made

them feel disempowered, confused, and sometimes victimised. This was a reflective exercise and translated into the Language that Cares guide, published by TACT in March.

Language that Cares is not a definitive or exhaustive revision of all the terms used in the care system and does not represent every child and young person’s view. However, it starts a much-needed discussion about the way we communicate and engage with children and young people in care, which should take place at all levels in the care system.

1 Lead by example. Examine the language used by your organisation to describe and communicate with children and young people. Could this language be seen as complicated or opaque in any way? Why are some words used and not others? What is the reason behind using jargon? As a leader in your organisation, you personally should not use language that potentially alienates and victimises the children and young people you work for. Change needs leaders that are able to empathise, reflect, and challenge others when they use language that discriminates or is difficult for children and young people to understand. Imagine you are a child struggling to understand all the terms and jargon you are so familiar with – how would you feel?

2 Set up a caring language initiative in your organisation. Make reflective practice around language part of the agenda in the development of professionals in your organisation. Discuss the use of language and the effect it has. What are the terms you use to talk about your children and young people? Could they be alienating, stigmatising, derogatory or hard to understand? Which of them could be classed as children’s services jargon? Why do you use certain terms? Could there be alternatives?

In our efforts to support and care for children and young people, we risk working “without” them when we use terms they do not understand or feel uncomfortable with. Dissect the language used by your services every day and question what it actually means. We need to use language that is inclusive. Our work with children and young people takes place when they are going

through difficult times in their lives. The last thing we want to do is add to the stress or difficulty of their situation by not making ourselves understood or using language that could be seen as offensive or derogatory. This will not help build a relationship with them.

3 Involve children and young people. Ask your children and young people which words they feel are confusing, demeaning or complicated. Raise the topic with your Children in Care Council or young people’s forum or organise a specific event. Create an environment where children and young people feel confident in telling you what they do not understand or feel uncomfortable with. Appoint a caring language champion from among your staff alongside a young person to lead on this work.

Gather children and young people’s opinions on what expressions or words they would like professionals to use and share them with your workforce. This will guide staff when working directly with children and young people and help them use accessible and respectful language when writing reports or care plans.

4 Keep reviewing. Language changes with time. Don’t make this a one-off exercise, but continue to listen to what your children and young people have to say. Is your organisation doing enough? Keep it on the agenda to avoid the risk of unhelpful terms creeping back into meetings, reports and discussions.

5 Share what you have learned. Share your children and young people’s opinions and comments with TACT, as well as other local authorities and organisations to help the Language that Cares movement gather momentum. It is important we learn from each other about how to build supportive relationships with our children and young people. TACT is committed to continuing the production and evolution of Language that Cares and we want more organisations to join us so we can show our children and young people we really care about them and how they feel.

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