



Advantaged Thinking Language Guide

**A tool for using Advantaged Thinking language
with young people**



Brotherhood of St Laurence
Working for an Australia free of poverty

**Let's make
change
that lasts**



Why words matter

The words we use to talk to, and about young people matter. Words can drive conversation, deepen understanding, and create meaningful relationships. At the same time, the language we use can perpetuate negative stereotypes, exclude or alienate people, and confuse messages. To build inclusive spaces in which young people can thrive and bring their talent to the fore, we must be intentional in how we engage with young people on a day-to-day basis, starting with the language we use.

Advantaged Thinking

The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) Youth department is committed to working with young people in a way that facilitates future planning and builds on their aspirations, talents and abilities. As part of this commitment, the BSL's Youth Team have been using and promoting Advantaged Thinking across a suite of youth programs and services, including employment, education, housing, youth justice and Out of Home Care (OoHC) settings.

Advantaged Thinking emphasises what people can do rather than what they can't do. This builds young people's capacity to make positive decisions in their lives, to think and act on their own behalf. It is reflected in the language that we use when having conversations with young people and also in the language we use to describe them.

The 7 Tests of Advantaged Thinking can be used to frame how we interact effectively and respectfully with others. Test One of Advantaged Thinking; 'How we talk about people' focuses on how the language we use should identify people in a dignified and respectful way. This test challenges us to acknowledge the people we work with as people first and the challenges they are experiencing as secondary. Fundamentally, the Advantaged Thinking approach challenges us to re-think how we speak about young people – to use positive language rather than the language of disadvantage.



How to use this guide

This guide is a tool to be more mindful of language—personally, professionally, and organisationally. It challenges you to think critically about the language you choose and to remember that creating more equitable systems is not possible without deep and intentional cultural change.

Throughout the guide you will find the reflections of young people themselves, checklists that help us return to an Advantaged Thinking mindset, and a glossary of terms and conversation starters to add to our Advantaged Thinking repertoire.

We recognise that language is constantly evolving, and this resource requires regular updates and continued input from young people to stay relevant. We also acknowledge that context matters, and the same word or phrase could feel empowering to one person and dehumanising to another. Practitioners will have the contextual expertise and skill to make this resource work best for them and the young people they work with.



Youth voice is key

The young people we work alongside are the most important voice in the room. Therefore, young people were instrumental in the development of this resource, providing their insights and expertise through workshops, written feedback and one-on-one conversations.

BSL Youth Advisors conveyed a clear message about how to use language in a way that is Advantaged Thinking:

-  Demonstrate that you trust us; say things like 'I know you can do it'.
-  Don't speak too formally or use jargon that we can't understand. There are too many acronyms!
-  We like it when you use playful language. Don't take everything too seriously.
-  Use language that breaks down the power imbalance between service provider and young person.
-  Show respect, honesty and kindness.

-  Feeling welcome and valued is important to us.
-  Use our own words whenever you can. Don't put words in our mouths.
-  If you are writing about a young person, ask them to write about themselves. They will know more than anybody else.
-  Focus on the things we are doing, or want to do. Don't only look at what we are lacking.
-  We are leaders and we have ideas. Don't shut us down – treat us like equals

People not cases

Language used by services and practitioners can sometimes inadvertently de-humanise and de-personalise the people accessing the services. Young people consistently report they do not wish to be referred to as 'a case'. Case management generally tends to define, focus on and invest in people's problems rather than their potential. Likewise, this language also has an impact on practitioners sense of self, how we feel about ourselves, how we navigate society, and interact with other people. By choosing person centred language in our interactions with and about young people, our role titles and position descriptions, we are able to humanise the process itself.

For example, the role title of Youth Development Coach insinuates a completely different working relationship with a young person than Case Manager does. The role of the coach is to support, encourage and explore what might be happening for the young person they are coaching. The young person is in the driver's seat.

Body language

Body language can indicate openness and curiosity in our interactions with young people. Be aware of your gestures, posture, eye-contact, and the messages they may be sending. For example, a slumped posture may indicate that the person has low spirits, is tired or feels disinterested, whereas, an upright posture may show high spirits, high energy and confidence. Leaning forward with a relaxed posture may imply openness, interest and a willingness to listen.





Advantaged Thinking conversations with and about young people

As you engage in conversations about young people with colleagues, community partners and families, consider how your language may contribute to and shape people's beliefs about and interactions with young people. As Advantaged Thinking organisations and practitioners, we want to make sure that our language:

- Amplifies strengths
- Is relevant and context specific
- Is open and curious

The table below provides some guidance around how you can embed these principles in your day-to-day work.

Consider	Avoid	Ask yourself
Does the language you are using amplify strengths?		
Advantaged Thinking conversations help practitioners' understanding of the young person's strengths, interests, and positive contributions. Use positive language to describe and amplify people's abilities, potential and value. Positive language should be at least in balance with descriptions of need and challenge.	While it is important to acknowledge the challenges that a young person may be experiencing, avoid focusing primarily on risk factors or what they might be lacking. Avoid descriptions that suggest pity. Terms such as 'enduring', and 'victim' imply the young person is suffering.	What are the strengths and interests of this young person? How can I make a direct investment in their individual talents and skills? How can we learn more about what makes them happy and engaged? What is the young person already doing that we can build upon? What are some ways that we can celebrate this young person's strengths and achievements?

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By using language that highlights people's skills and talents it can help shift a person's internal narrative in a positive direction and not have their self identity overshadowed by negative stereotypes

— BSL Youth Advisor

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Consider	Avoid	Ask yourself
Is your language informed by context?		
We know that young people's learning, development and behaviour occur in a particular context. When having conversations about young people, it is important to acknowledge the relationships, systems and experiences around them as well. Advantaged Thinking asks us to consider equally the individual and structural approaches to change.	Make sure your descriptors are relevant and necessary to convey the message you want to convey. Often, we ask young people to volunteer information about themselves, without thinking about the intention behind this. While we sometimes need to describe young people in terms of their experiences or challenges, we should never allow the negatives to be at a higher ratio than the positives. Often, we can look for the challenges or problems that young people face and try to fix them. Remember, we can't fix or change young people, but we can create an environment that unlocks their potential. Think about how the words you use might affect young people of different backgrounds, being attune to race, disability, gender, or sexuality.	What works well for this young person? What broader contexts (school, home, etc.) might be contributing to what I have observed or learnt about them?
Is your language open and curious?		
Open and curious conversations seek to understand without judgment. It allows young people to describe their situation and needs in their own words. Ask curious, judgement free questions. Aim for young people to do the majority of the talking.	Watch out for assumptions that hinder your ability to know young people as whole and unique individuals. Make sure you're not relying on generalisations. 'Why' questions often invoke judgment (guilt, shame) in the person being questioned because there is an implication of motive. Try rephrasing 'Why' questions as a 'What' question. E.g., 'Why did you do that?' becomes, 'What were you hoping to achieve by doing that?'	What assumptions might be limiting the way we see this young person? How could we let go of some of these assumptions? Who else might have ideas about what would work well for this young person? Consider community members, family members, other staff, etc.



Finding words that work

How we talk about and refer to people informs how we see and respond to people. Calling someone a homeless person, or 'at-risk', immediately reinforces a set of stereotypes that can be limiting. Recognising people for their abilities and potential, as well as their challenges and experiences, offers a more empowering and productive narrative.

At the same time, identifying disadvantaged thinking language challenges us to communicate more clearly and accurately without falling back on harmful stereotypes. Finding Advantaged Thinking language is important not only when it comes to the conversations we have with and about young people, but also when preparing things like role descriptions, website content, speeches, news articles, or case notes.

You might like to ask yourself the following questions:

- ☐ Am I avoiding pigeon-holing or using stereotypes about young people?
- ☐ Am I actively disrupting labels often placed on young people?
- ☐ Am I recognising the systems that create and perpetuate inequality, rather than blaming the individual?
- ☐ Are the descriptors I am using relevant and necessary to achieve the desired outcome?
- ☐ Am I using affirmative language?
- ☐ Am I limiting another person with the language I am using?
- ☐ Is the language I am using amplifying the strengths of the young person?
- ☐ Am I responding with empathy to other peoples' ideas and experiences?

Advantaged Thinking **glossary of terms**

Our goal was to understand young people's perspectives on commonly used terms in the youth sector. To achieve this, we collaborated with a group of Youth Advisors employed by BSL to co-produce and agree on terms they support and are happy to be referred to as by practitioners. The below Glossary of Terms aims to support the use of language that young people choose, prefer and are more familiar with.

The glossary includes examples of language that focus on deficits, along with their Advantaged Thinking alternatives. For instance, the term "vulnerable" is seen as a deficits-based language in the table below. It originated from the Latin

word for "wound" and may imply that individuals are fragile and require protection.

In our consultations, Youth Advisors also shared with us the importance of being mindful of power dynamics at play, avoiding language that places blame on the young person, and avoiding using jargon that is not understood by or relevant to young people.

We would like to thank the many young people that inspired and challenged us to think critically and dismantle some of the disadvantaged thinking language used in our services and society as a whole.

Deficits-based language	Advantaged Thinking alternative
Vulnerable	- Looking for support - Feeling unsafe
Client	- Young person - Program participant - Connected with a program - Program contributor - Student
Case Manager	- Youth Coach - Youth Development Coach - Youth Worker - Advisor - Mentor
Case study	- Story - Spotlight on - Experience - Life experience - Point of view - Highlight
Case plan	- Future plans - My plan - Learning Plan - Goal outline - Success pathway

Deficits-based language	Advantaged Thinking alternative
Homeless person	Person experiencing homelessness
Crisis	- Seeking opportunities - Facing a challenge - Overcoming challenges
Suffering	- Working to recover from - Experiencing - Living with - Overcoming
Intervene	- Engage with - Work with - Work alongside - Taking a chance on a young person
Diagnose	Clarify
At- Risk	Looking for support
Hard to reach	- Under-reached - Under-served - May benefit from alternative communication styles

Deficits-based language	Advantaged Thinking alternative
Unemployed	• Looking for employment • Opportunity seeker • Job seeking • Looking for an opportunity to work • Job hunter • Job applicant • Job competitor
Disadvantaged	• Facing a social / financial barrier • Overcoming a hurdle • Working to thrive • Working through challenges

Deficits-based language	Advantaged Thinking alternative
Financially disadvantaged	• Financially developing
Disconnected	• Not in the mood right now • Taking a break • Not getting the right opportunities • Not in the right headspace

Language and The Campaign

The Campaign is Test Number Seven of Advantaged Thinking and is about everyone's responsibility to take action. Test Seven is relevant to advocacy, campaigns and influencing work, ultimately aiming for high-level policy and public sentiment shifts in thinking about young people; away from a deficit model and towards a society in which young people can turn their talents into assets. The Campaign focuses on:

- changing community perceptions
- demonstrating that young people have gifts and talents that can be nurtured
- collaborating with community services, government and mainstream institutions to create structural change.

This effort is aided by Advantaged Thinking language and focusing on success, especially through publicity and media. Some organisations and media outlets rely on negative narratives, using fear to trigger emotions like outrage and a sense of crisis. But to bring people along with us, we need to support the people we are campaigning with and for in an empowering, solution- focused way. By using positive, hopeful

language, stories and images, we can show the wider community how changing our approach to working with young people will work in practice. As Advantaged Thinkers, we need to find the language that makes people, including decision-makers, see how our solutions will work, make them appealing, and make them a priority.

Storytelling is a powerful tool to campaign for change. It enables connection and understanding between people who have very different life experiences. When campaigning for change, be sure to centre that story around the young person or people involved. All too often, young people are spoken for, or over, by family members, advocates, academics and other adults who claim authority over their lives.

The Campaign also includes mentoring and empowering young people to become their own advocates for change. As well as having their voice heard and their needs addressed, being involved with the advocacy process can allow young people to learn valuable lessons and skills. Sometimes, the most important thing we can do is amplify the voices of young people by creating a platform for them to lead change.

Being given a platform to share your experiences and to have your voice heard is incredibly empowering and can help build people's confidence

— BSL Youth Advisor

Job Seeker not Dole Bludger Campaign

An example of a successful Campaign that challenges community perceptions about young people is BSL's 2017 Job Hunter #NotDoleBludger advertising campaign. The campaign featured eye-catching images of young job seekers on bus shelters, highlighting their abilities and drive to be valuable members of the workforce.

BSL Executive Director at the time, Tony Nicholson, said it was time to stand up for young unemployed who are too often stereotyped in public discussion. "Let's not replay the same old inaccurate story – that Australia's young unemployed people are lazy and don't want to work. From practical experience, I know this is far from the reality. Our young people know all too well that the passport to a good life in Australia is to work so they can achieve their goals and ambitions."

"We need to concentrate efforts as a community in creating opportunity for young people and building up their capacity for work."



The Campaign is about learning and growing together. Ask yourself, am I:

- ☐ Nurturing connections, trust and community?
- ☐ Building the capacity of others?
- ☐ Challenging dominant cultures and the status quo?
- ☐ Being challenged (and challenging others) to sit in and learn from discomfort?
- ☐ Capturing and reflecting on collective wisdom?
- ☐ Maximising impact through collaborative approaches?
- ☐ Amplifying and being led by young people's voices?
- ☐ Creating safe and inclusive spaces?
- ☐ Spreading what works and sharing openly?