

Values that sit behind our language

Language shapes reality, especially for young people, parents and families in out-of-home care. The words we use reveal our values and priorities. In child protection, examining our language uncovers some uncomfortable truths about what we're really prioritising.

It's a chicken and egg situation: does the language we use shape how we see children and families, or does how we see them drive the language we choose? The answer is both. The child protection system has developed language that reflects its institutional values of efficiency, risk management and legal compliance. This language then reinforces those same values, influencing how people within the system think and act.

This resource has been developed in partnership with the Family Inclusion Peer Support & Advocacy Team following our joint webinar "Words that wound to Words that heal", with input from people with lived experience of out-of-home care and our Young Person Working Group, and through our discussions with practitioners working across the child protection and out-of-home care sector.

The aim of this resource is to provoke thought. It is by no means an exhaustive list. This is part of an ongoing conversation happening across the sector, with other organisations and communities doing similar work.

A word of caution: changing the language is an important first step, but it doesn't transform the underlying attitudes or practices on its own. New words can open the door to new ways of thinking, but real change only happens when the behaviour and systems behind the language shift as well, otherwise new words can pick up the same negative associations over time.

"Case" - Reducing people to files

This language reduces young people, parents and families to a file and strips away their humanity. This language extends to "case worker" and "case manager", making it sound like those we support are hard work, or a problem to be solved. Behind this language lies a system that sees young people and parents and families as work to be managed rather than people needing connection.

An alternative: Instead of managing cases, focus on building relationships. This looks like calling people by their name or talking about "the young person I'm helping" rather than a "case." Every interaction becomes an opportunity to treat people as people.



"Final Orders" - The illusion of permanence

This language (which relates to a court decision that determines the long-term care arrangements for a child) creates the illusion of permanence. But children's lives aren't legal documents, and families don't operate according to court timelines. This legal language stems from a desire for certainty in uncertain times.

An alternative: Rather than thinking in terms of "final" anything, focus on providing ongoing support that can flex and adapt. This looks like talking about "current arrangements" while acknowledging that families are dynamic and needs evolve. Be mindful about adopting legal terminology when speaking to families as this reinforces the power dynamic. Using language that is jargony or confusing can impact a family's confidence and understanding.

"Lacks insight" - Dismissing people's understanding

This phrase positions professionals as the experts on someone else's life and dismisses lived experience. Often, parents and families aren't given all the information they need, then are told they "lack insight". How can they know what they don't know? This language reinforces power imbalances.



An alternative: Instead of dismissing people's understanding, explore different perspectives with curiosity. In practice this looks like asking: "Can you help me understand how you see this situation?" and ensuring families have the information they need to fully participate in decisions about their lives.

"Placement" - Like they're objects to be positioned

The word "placement" reduces the profound experience of a child joining a family to a logistical transaction. When we talk about "placement," we're not talking about a child finding a home - we're talking about filling a vacancy.

An alternative: Instead of talking about placement, we can talk about helping children stay supported at home wherever possible and when they can't, ensuring they are with family, kin, or in homes where they can feel like they genuinely belong. Language like "finding family" or "finding belonging" helps reflect that intent.

"Removal" - As if children are a problem

The language of "removal" frames the child as a problem to be extracted, not a person experiencing trauma. It reduces children to objects to be moved. More broadly, this language reinforces a narrative where the system (government) is the 'protector' which rescues children from 'bad' parents. It ignores the reality that a lot of families need support, and that separating a child from their parent is itself a profound trauma.

An alternative: Instead of "removing" children, we should focus on creating safety and providing support. We could talk about "supporting this family to find stability", while recognising trauma and responding with compassion.

"Transport" - Like cargo to be moved

This word reduces a young person's journey to a logistical task, stripping away emotional significance. Visiting family can be filled with anticipation, anxiety, hope, or grief. When we talk about "transport," we focus on the mechanical task rather than supporting the young person through what might be a significant experience.

An alternative: Talk about "supporting them to get to" visits or appointments. Say "I'll drive you to see your mum" or "I'll come with you to your appointment" - language that recognises the relationship and care for the young person's experience.

"Non-Compliant" - Blaming without understanding

This term assumes defiance when there may be genuine barriers. Compliance is about policies and standards, not people. When we label people as non-compliant, we reduce them to objects that need to be controlled rather than recognising them as people with agency, rights, and legitimate reasons for their actions.

An alternative: Ask "what's getting in the way?" and "what do you need from me to support you?". These questions open up space to explore barriers, understand circumstances, and the very real struggles parents and families face. Starting from curiosity instead of judgement invites honesty, partnership, and problem-solving.



"Emotionally unavailable" - Policing people's emotions

The phrase "emotionally unavailable" judges how people should express their feelings and usually ignores the context of their situation. Sometimes people are too fearful to respond with emotion because of judgement or power imbalances, or they don't understand what's happening. This language pathologises natural responses to trauma and systemic pressure.

An alternative: Create safe spaces for authentic expression. Recognise that people respond to stress differently and that our role is to build trust where genuine emotion can be shared, not to demand it on our timeline. Where there is genuine relationship, we're able to better understand how someone responds to stress.

"System" - gears and cogs

The use of the word "system" can make children and young people feel like burdens or components being processed rather than people who matter. For young people, being part of a "system" suggests they're problems to be managed through mechanical processes, when what they need is connection, understanding, and to feel valued.



An alternative: We could use "out-of-home care community" rather than system, emphasising that we're all part of something together. When we talk about community, we centre relationships and shared humanity rather than mechanical and detached processing.

"Birth" or "Biological Parent" - Stripping identity and role

Depending on how these terms are used, they reduce a person's identity to their reproductive function and strip away their role as Mum or Dad. Behind this language can sit a hierarchy where some people are "real" parents and others are merely biological contributors. For many parents, being called a "birth parent" feels like their parental status has already been decided.

An alternative: Be led by the child in how they refer to their parents and family members. When distinction is necessary for clarity, terms like "their Mum Sarah" maintain dignity while providing context. Be mindful of how language used in documentation can impact parents. The goal is to support the child's sense of belonging and connection with all the people who care for them.

"Half-sibling" - Measuring family bonds by biology

This term reduces sibling relationships to a fraction based on genetics. In everyday life, most families don't talk this way. This clinical language suggests some sibling relationships are somehow less legitimate than others, prioritising biological connection over actual emotional bonds and lived experience.

An alternative: Simply talk about brothers and sisters, or use their names. When necessary for clarity, say "they share the same mum" or "they have different dads" as factual context rather than labels that define relationships. Focus on supporting sibling connections and recognising that family bonds aren't determined solely by genetics.

"Investigation" - Assuming guilt and wrongdoing

This word brings assumptions of criminality, positioning families as suspects rather than people who may need support. The investigative approach focuses on finding evidence of failure rather than understanding complex circumstances. It establishes a power imbalance where professionals are detectives and families are potential perpetrators.

An alternative: Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency (VACCA) suggests using "understanding story" instead. This acknowledges that every family has a story - often shaped by trauma, disadvantage, and systemic barriers - that deserves our curiosity and compassion. This creates space for families to share authentically and for workers to respond with support not judgement. It helps us to see a wider picture and narrative of strengths, courage, and resilience.

"Respite" - Suggesting children are burdens

This term frames the child as a burden that carers need relief from. It positions the child as the problem rather than recognising that all families sometimes need flexibility and support. For children, hearing about "respite" can reinforce feelings that they're unwanted or too much trouble.

An alternative: Use language that reflects regular family experiences: "having a sleepover," "staying with their aunty for the weekend," or "spending some time with another family." This normalises the experience and removes the suggestion that the child is a burden.

"Hard to engage" - Ignoring trauma and mistrust

Labelling parents and families as "hard to engage" misunderstands the often reasonable mistrust felt towards government services. For Aboriginal families, this mistrust is rooted in the historical and ongoing impacts of child removal policies and The Stolen Generation. This language blames families for being defensive rather than acknowledging why they might not trust the system.

An alternative: Building trust in culturally safe ways through "seeking to understand concerns" acknowledges that it's the work of the system to earn engagement through consistent, respectful and culturally aware language, behaviours and actions.

Language that carries cultural bias



Webinar participants noted that language carries cultural bias, particularly in how the system speaks about, and to, families from diverse cultural backgrounds and, most significantly, Aboriginal families who are persistently overrepresented in out-of-home care. Many commonly used terms cause harm, reflecting deep systemic racism through implicit values about family, safety, and parenting that can judge or minimise cultural practices, kinship structures, and community responsibilities.

Deeper exploration of culturally grounded language, especially in relation to Aboriginal children, families, and communities, is being led by those with lived experience, cultural authority, and community knowledge, and through the leadership of peak and community-led organisations like AbSec, VACCA, and local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations. While it sits beyond the scope of this initial resource, moving towards more healing language is important for sector workers to understand and act on when working with Aboriginal children and families. It is essential for any genuine shift towards values of respectful, relational, and culturally safe practice.

Further resources

We encourage you to explore other resources, engage with community-led organisations, and continue reflecting on the language you use in your practice. This work requires humility, ongoing learning, and genuine partnership with the families and communities most impacted by the language we choose.

Visit www.centreforrelationalcare.org.au/knowledge-hub/language for other resources on alternatives to common 'system' language, and please let us know if there are other resources we can share at change@centreforrelationalcare.org.au