

The impact of language

This resource shares insights from lived experience and sector feedback on how language is experienced, and what this means for creating safer, more respectful systems and services.

“Language can be a source of profound harm, not only to victims and survivors but also to their families and the wider community. Sometimes, language is deliberately used to downplay the seriousness and consequences of child sexual abuse. More often, harmful language is used unintentionally – repeated without reflection on its impact. Yet the words we choose shape societal understanding, attitudes and beliefs.”

RESHAPING THE CONVERSATION LIVED EXPERIENCE WORKING GROUP

Language shapes narratives, experiences and relationships. The assumptions, values and beliefs we hold influence the language we use, which can either reinforce power and harm or convey solidarity, care and respect.

The [Child Sexual Abuse Language Guide](#), developed as part of the National Centre’s Reshaping the Conversation project, is the first of its kind in Australia. It reflects the complexity and nuance of child sexual abuse, recognising its many forms and lifelong impacts. As a living resource, it will continue to evolve alongside emerging understanding of terms and their impacts.

Child sexual abuse is often silenced or invisible within larger conversations about sexual violence. Using precise and intentional language is critical to accurately name the abuse of power and age-based asymmetry involved, and to avoid minimising harm by equating it with adult experiences of sexual violence.

Feedback highlights the important role leaders and organisations play in shaping how language is understood and used in practice. The [Language Guide](#) can be used alongside the [Child Sexual Abuse Language Guide: Introduction and Background Information](#) to support ongoing reflection and shared understanding.

“When survivors are treated with care, respect and dignity, our collective response to child sexual abuse becomes more informed and effective.”

RESHAPING THE CONVERSATION LIVED EXPERIENCE WORKING GROUP

“This is an incredible resource. I would definitely recommend a printed version for staff areas, to encourage those working with children to become familiar with.”

EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER AND CHILDREN’S RIGHTS AMBASSADOR

What we are hearing

"I did not expect to be so profoundly moved by this document. As a victim-survivor of CSA who has worked in this area (specifically around child exploitation materials), I thought it would all be familiar, but so many of these terms and definitions felt incredibly helpful. I hadn't realised how some unhelpful language was lingering in my stories (like "complainant" - such a painful term for the brave and complex act of reporting CSA). And others, like words for disclosing formerly dissociated memories.."

SURVIVOR ADVOCATE

Feedback gathered from practitioners, lived experience advisors and sector participants highlights the powerful role language plays in shaping experience and understanding. Respondents described the Language Guide as:

- Thoughtful, validating and affirming
- Helpful in acknowledging lived experience
- Survivor-centred and respectful
- A useful step toward more consistent, respectful language
- Supporting dignity
- Many participants described feeling seen and supported by the terminology and framing used
- Terms such as 'victim-survivor' resonated, reflecting the complexity of lived experience
- Some respondents suggested simplifying or further clarifying terms to support accessibility for broader audiences
- The term and definitions of 'grooming' were well received
- Some respondents valued not recommending use of the term 'paedophile'

"I wanted to congratulate you on the Child Sexual Abuse Language Guide. It is such an important piece of work...Resources like the Guide don't just inform practice, they shape the culture of how we engage with victim-survivors, and they create a space for more ethical and compassionate conversations...we will gratefully ensure we refer to this guide going forward."

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT REPRESENTATIVE

Opportunities for impact

As leaders introduce and embed the Language Guide into organisational practice and communication, it can create opportunities to reflect on how assumptions, values and power shape the language used with clients, staff and in public-facing material. Reflective practice, alongside **continuous learning and improvement processes**, can help explore these dynamics and support more thoughtful, respectful communication.

Reflective practice invites leaders to explore how they talk about child sexual abuse, before extending reflection into team discussions, staff meetings and individual, peer and/or group supervision. Modelling intentional language can demonstrate a clear commitment to change.

Creating opportunities for feedback from both clients and staff is essential. Feedback mechanisms enable organisations to identify where language or practice may be causing harm and respond in a timely and meaningful way. Embedding feedback into organisational culture strengthens accountability and supports continuous improvement.

The Language Guide includes multiple definitions for some terms, reflecting the diversity of experiences and contexts of child sexual abuse. It also identifies terms to avoid due to their potential to cause harm. Leaders play an important role in supporting consistent understanding and application of these definitions, promoting language that is accurate, respectful and survivor-centred across organisational activities.

Strengthening relational approaches across all levels of the organisation – including with staff, clients, Boards and external stakeholders – supports more thoughtful communication. Moving from transactional interactions to purposeful, respectful engagement can create opportunities to improve language use and challenge harmful practices.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1 What language or terms related to child sexual abuse should we be using?
- 2 Do we ask clients and staff about their preferences regarding child sexual abuse terminology and language?
- 3 What induction, training and reflective supervision opportunities are offered to staff to ensure their language and practice is trauma-informed and victim-survivor aware?
- 4 Do we actively invite feedback from clients and staff?
- 5 Do we use feedback as an opportunity for continuous learning?
- 6 Are feedback processes easily locatable on websites, and/or discussed regularly with clients?

Key takeaways

- 01 Language directly shapes how victim-survivors experience systems and services – it can foster safety and trust or reinforce harm.
- 02 Leaders play an important role in supporting intentional, consistent and respectful language across organisational systems and practice – through modelling behaviours, setting expectations and embedding the Language Guide within policies, processes and culture.
- 03 Everyone has a responsibility to reflect on how they communicate and contribute to safer environments. Ultimately, language is not neutral; it shapes experiences, builds trust, and determines whether victim-survivors feel safe, respected and heard.