

# Sexual and / or criminal exploitation

Language guidance for professionals  
working with adults.



# Introduction

This guidance can be used by professionals when discussing or recording information about the exploitation of adults at risk, including when talking to adults, sharing intelligence and delivering training.

As professionals, it is imperative that we lead the way in representing and advocating for adults who may be at risk. The tones and content of the words we use have impacts and can prompt the way in which an adult and / or their representative wants to engage with you as professional.

Language implying that the adult is complicit or responsible for the abuse or exploitation that has happened or may happen to them **must be avoided**.

Language should reflect the presence of coercion and the lack of control people have in abusive or exploitative situations, and must recognise the severity of the impact exploitation has on the person.

Victim-blaming language may reinforce messages from perpetrators around shame and guilt. This in turn may prevent the person from disclosing their abuse, through fear of being blamed by professionals. When victim-blaming language is used amongst professionals, there is a risk of normalising and minimising the person's experience, resulting in a lack of appropriate response.

The following tables detail words and phrases which should not be used and offers some alternative descriptors. This information has been adapted from materials developed from the [Appropriate Language: Child Sexual and/or Criminal Exploitation document produced in collaboration with The Children's Society, Victim Support and the National Police Chiefs' Council.](#)



Inappropriate term	Suggested alternatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Putting themselves at risk.</li> <li>Involved in risk taking behaviours.</li> </ul> <p><i>This implies that the adult is responsible for the risks presented by the perpetrator(s) and that they are able to make free and informed choices.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Despite the risk, they continue to the location.</li> </ul> <p><i>This implies that the adult is responsible for any exploitation they experience in a location. It does not recognise abusive or exploitative context or their right to be in the location without experiencing harm.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The adult may have been groomed.</li> <li>The adult is at an increased vulnerability of being abused and/or exploited.</li> <li>A perpetrator may exploit the adult's increased vulnerability.</li> <li>The adult is not in a protective environment.</li> <li>The situation could reduce the adult's safety.</li> <li>The location/situation could increase a perpetrator's opportunity to abuse them.</li> <li>It is unclear whether the adult is under duress.</li> <li>There are concerns that the adult may be being sexually abused and/or exploited.</li> <li>There are concerns that there is a power imbalance influencing the adult to act in this way.</li> <li>There are concerns regarding other influences on the adult.</li> <li>There are concerns regarding the adult's capacity to make relevant decisions regarding contact</li> </ul>

Inappropriate term	Suggested alternatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sexual activity with...</li> </ul> <p><i>This implies consensual sexual activity has taken place. If it occurs within an abusive or exploitative context this term is not appropriate. Adults may have temporarily been unable to consent due to intoxication and/or may lack capacity to consent to sex due to some other reason.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The adult has been sexually abused.</li> <li>The adult has been raped.</li> <li>There are reports of sexual abuse.</li> <li>The adult has described sexual activity; however concerns exist that they may have been groomed and/ or coerced.</li> <li>There are concerns the adult may have been unable to consent (consider MCA assessment)</li> </ul>

Inappropriate term	Suggested alternatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sexually active since...</li> </ul> <p><i>When referring to the adult as a child in the context of non-recent reports of abuse, a child cannot consent to sex and is therefore being abused. This should be reflected in the language used.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The adult has reported that they have been raped.</li> <li>The adult has been/may have been sexually abused.</li> <li>Concerns exist that the adult may have been coerced, exploited, or sexually abused.</li> </ul>

Inappropriate term	Suggested alternatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Has been contacting/seeking relationships with people of concern via social media/online.</li> </ul> <p><i>This implies that the adult is responsible for the communication and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context. Need to consider MCA assessment re use of social media.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>People of concern may have been contacting/ targeting the adult.</li> <li>The adult may have been groomed/targeted via social media.</li> <li>There are concerns that the alleged perpetrator is facilitating communication with the adult.</li> <li>The adult is vulnerable to online perpetrators.</li> <li>There are concerns that others may be using online technology to access or abuse the adult.</li> </ul>

Inappropriate term	Suggested alternatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offering him/her drugs seemingly in return for sex.</li> <li>Sex work.</li> </ul> <p><i>This implies that the adult is responsible for the abuse and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The adult is being sexually exploited.</li> <li>There are concerns that the adult has been raped.</li> <li>Perpetrators are sexually abusing the adult.</li> <li>The adult is being sexually abused.</li> <li>The adult's vulnerability regarding drug and or alcohol use is being used by others to abuse them.</li> <li>The perpetrators have a hold over the adult by the fact that they have a drug dependency.</li> </ul>

Inappropriate term	Suggested alternatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In a relationship with...</li> </ul> <p><i>This implies that the adult is in a positive, consensual relationship and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The adult says that they are in a relationship with a person and there are concerns about that person's age, the imbalance of power, exploitation and/or offending.</li> <li>The adult has been/is being groomed, exploited and/or controlled and coerced.</li> </ul>

Inappropriate term	Suggested alternatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promiscuous</li> </ul> <p><i>This implies consensual sexual activity has taken place. Promiscuous is a judgemental term which stereotypes and labels people. It is not appropriate in any context.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The adult is vulnerable to being sexually exploited.</li> <li>There are concerns that the adult is being sexually exploited.</li> </ul>

Inappropriate term	Suggested alternatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prostituting themselves or selling themselves</li> </ul> <p><i>This implies that the adult is responsible for the abuse and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The adult is vulnerable to being sexually exploited.</li> <li>There are concerns that the adult is being sexually exploited.</li> </ul>

Inappropriate term	Suggested alternatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Drug running – they are drug running or are recruiting others to deal drugs</li> </ul> <p><i>This implies that the adult is responsible for the exploitation and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Criminal exploitation (CE).</li> <li>The adult is being criminally exploited.</li> <li>There are concerns that the adult is being trafficked for the purpose of criminal exploitation.</li> </ul>

Inappropriate term	Suggested alternatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>They are choosing this lifestyle or are making a lifestyle choice</li> </ul> <p><i>This implies that the adult is responsible for the exploitation and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The adult is being criminally exploited.</li> <li>The adult is being sexually exploited.</li> </ul>

Inappropriate term	Suggested alternatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offering the adult drugs seemingly in exchange for sex</li> </ul> <p>This implies that the adult is responsible for the exploitation and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The adult is being sexually/criminally exploited.</li> <li>The adult is being criminally exploited through drug debt.</li> <li>There are concerns that the adult has been raped as they do not have the freedom or capacity to consent.</li> <li>Perpetrators are sexually abusing the adult.</li> <li>The adult is being sexually abused.</li> <li>The adult's vulnerability regarding drug use is being used by others to abuse them.</li> <li>The perpetrators have a hold over the adult by the fact that the adult has a drug dependency.</li> </ul>

Inappropriate term	Suggested alternatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spending time/associating with individuals of concern</li> </ul> <p>This implies that the adult is responsible for the exploitation and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The adult says that they are friends with a person and there are concerns about that person's age, the imbalance of power, exploitation and/or offending.</li> <li>There are concerns that the adult has been groomed, exploited and/or coerced and controlled.</li> </ul>

Inappropriate term	Suggested alternatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Would not cooperate with</li> <li>Tells lies</li> <li>Fabricates, exaggerates</li> <li>Has a history of making false allegations</li> <li>Not compliant or not engaging</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The adult did not feel safe enough to disclose.</li> <li>The adult may fear negative repercussions.</li> </ul>

Inappropriate term	Suggested alternatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Missing</li> </ul> <p>Where there are concerns that an adult is not where they normally expected to be and there are concerns they may be at risk.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The adult does not feel able to stay at their current location.</li> <li>The adult is being coerced / groomed to leave.</li> <li>Someone else has control over the adult's behaviour.</li> </ul>

Inappropriate term	Suggested alternatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gang Involved or Affiliated</li> <li>Allows people to use their property for criminal activity</li> </ul> <p><i>This implies that the adult is responsible for the exploitation and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context or powerful.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The adult is being sexually/criminally exploited.</li> <li>Violence and crime affected adult, family or household.</li> <li>There are concerns that there is a power imbalance and powerful grooming forcing or compelling the adult to act in this way.</li> <li>There are concerns regarding other influences on the adult"</li> <li>Cuckooing</li> </ul>

Inappropriate term	Suggested alternatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Would not co-operate or engage with services.</li> </ul> <p><i>This places all the emphasis on the person. We need to think about some of the factors that might make it difficult for a person to engage with services. Including the coercive or controlling behaviour of others, fear, previous negative experiences of services or the inaccessibility of services.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The person did not feel safe enough to disclose.</li> <li>The person fears negative repercussions for disclosure/ engagement.</li> <li>Services are located in an area the person does not feel safe visiting.</li> </ul>

