




# WORDS MATTER

## TRAUMA SENSITIVE LANGUAGE WITH CHILDREN

Behaviour is often an expression of the way that children and young people have experienced their past relationships. They show their hurt and pain through what they do. The way that the behaviour is described can shape the way they see themselves and the way that others interact with them.

It is important that we do not use words that further alienate or disadvantage children and young people. Negative and unhelpful words can serve to blame children for their past experiences of trauma. It can lead to harmful labels being ascribed to children that they can never be rid of. We should use language that positively interprets their needs and suggest ways that children and young people can be better connect to the important people in their lives. Preferable language holds the expectations of adults to understand and react to children's needs rather than placing the responsibility for change with the child.

 <b>NEGATIVELY CHARGED LANGUAGE</b>	 <b>WHAT MIGHT BE HAPPENING IN THE MOMENT</b>	 <b>PREFERABLE LANGUAGE</b>
<p><b>DISRESPECTFUL AND RUDE</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Urge to push bad feelings away</li> <li>• Testing strength of connection</li> <li>• Seeking belonging with peers</li> <li>• Sense of shame</li> <li>• Sense of danger</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distressed</li> <li>• Afraid</li> <li>• Frustrated</li> <li>• Uncertain</li> <li>• Threatened</li> </ul>
<p><b>DEFIANT</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fearing separation from caregiver</li> <li>• Fearing change or transitions</li> <li>• Attempting to establish predictability</li> <li>• Trying to predict the level of safety of adult behaviours</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Afraid</li> <li>• Anxious</li> <li>• Shutdown</li> <li>• Feeling out of control</li> <li>• Needing distance</li> </ul>
<p><b>MANIPULATIVE</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using early survival patterns that previously kept them safe</li> <li>• Imitating early adult role models</li> <li>• Difficulty articulating feelings</li> <li>• Attempting to keep adults at a distance</li> <li>• Seeking support when they feel endangered</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Needing safety</li> <li>• Resourceful</li> <li>• Self-soothing</li> <li>• Trying to engage</li> <li>• Expressing uncertainty</li> <li>• Feeling overwhelmed</li> </ul>
<p><b>DISRUPTIVE</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling unworthy of connection</li> <li>• Avoiding feeling of shame</li> <li>• Feeling anxiety</li> <li>• Attempting to regain mastery over a situation</li> <li>• Attempting to compensate for poor social or learning skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distressed</li> <li>• Ashamed</li> <li>• Lacking confidence</li> <li>• Threatened</li> <li>• Anxious</li> <li>• Unhappy</li> <li>• Worried</li> </ul>

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## TRAUMA SENSITIVE LANGUAGE WITH CHILDREN



**NEGATIVELY CHARGED LANGUAGE**



**WHAT MIGHT BE HAPPENING IN THE MOMENT**



**PREFERABLE LANGUAGE**

**AGGRESSIVE AND OPPOSITIONAL**

**RISK TAKING**

**ABSCONDING**

**STEALS**

**SABOTAGES**

- Feeling unworthy of love
- Feeling stuck in rigidity or chaos
- Divided loyalty
- Fear of betrayal
- Attempting to create a distraction to protect themselves

- Feeling unworthy or unvalued
- Trying to reduce distress
- May be self-regulating in the form of self-harm or risk to others
- Seeking power, approval or affirmation of strength

- Feeling scared for themselves or someone they love
- Needing to move body to help regulate sensory overload

- Past patterns of self-reliance due to neglect
- Collecting items for self-preservation
- Wanting to impress peers
- Needing to feel reassured
- Seeking a sense of control in environment
- Attempting to be in control with adults

- Fearful of connecting or losing a connection
- Inability to trust due to past betrayal so push adults away
- Avoiding relationships
- Needing to create predictability
- Needing to create power and control
- Masking a lack of skills for the task

- Distressed
- Threatened
- Overstimulated
- Overwhelmed
- Reacting to change
- In need of connection

- Changing belonging
- Desperate
- Lonely
- Self-protective
- Limit testing
- Needing to be loved

- Dysregulated
- Overwhelmed
- Needing a safe relationship
- Hopeful of change
- Distressed
- Retreating
- Misunderstood

- Needing connection and belonging
- Feeling out of control
- Hungry
- Trying to be resourceful
- Desperate
- Survival focused

- Self-protective
- In pain
- Overwhelmed
- Disappointed
- Unsafe
- Reacting to uncertainty

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<p><b>SNEAKY</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being small or unseen may have been an early survival strategy</li> <li>• Early neglect may create need to control a situation or accumulate resources</li> <li>• Afraid of pain, threats or being misunderstood</li> <li>• Unwilling to appear vulnerable</li> <li>• Wanting to hurt someone they do not trust</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vigilant</li> <li>• Worried</li> <li>• Watchful</li> <li>• Tense</li> <li>• Agitated</li> <li>• On guard</li> <li>• Nervous</li> </ul>
<p><b>SHUT DOWN</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appeasing may be a learnt strategy to keep adults happy and avoid being hurt</li> <li>• Feeling excluded, unworthy or unloved</li> <li>• Shutting out traumatic memories or thoughts</li> <li>• May indicate cognitive processes are too hard to sustain</li> <li>• Fear of expressing emotions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alarmed</li> <li>• Sad</li> <li>• Disconnected</li> <li>• Overwhelmed</li> <li>• Hiding</li> <li>• Threatened</li> <li>• Seeking comfort</li> <li>• Agitated</li> </ul>
<p><b>LIAR AND DISHONEST</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling powerless</li> <li>• Avoiding a difficult truth</li> <li>• Re-interpreting reality to alleviate shame</li> <li>• Avoiding getting in trouble</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Afraid</li> <li>• Imagining things are different</li> <li>• Needing nurture</li> <li>• Confused</li> <li>• Needing acceptance</li> <li>• Hopeful of a different outcome</li> <li>• Feeling worthless and unlovable</li> </ul>
<p><b>ATTENTION SEEKING</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unmet need for connection or safety</li> <li>• Needing to feel loved and nurtured</li> <li>• Needing to feel seen, heard and valued</li> <li>• Fearing disconnection in social and peer relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Needing closeness</li> <li>• Needing connection</li> <li>• Displaced</li> <li>• Threatened</li> <li>• Uncertain</li> </ul>
<p><b>OVERREACTS OR EXAGGERATES</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sensory overload may make processing hard</li> <li>• Feeling unsafe with someone they see as a bully</li> <li>• Feeling shame</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distressed</li> <li>• Needing nurture</li> <li>• Needing connection</li> <li>• Overwhelmed</li> <li>• Reclaiming personal agency</li> <li>• Wanting to be listened to</li> <li>• Needing validation</li> </ul>

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**NEGATIVELY  
CHARGED  
LANGUAGE**



**WHAT MIGHT BE  
HAPPENING  
IN THE MOMENT**



**PREFERABLE  
LANGUAGE**

**UNGRATEFUL**

- May have blocked trust from past experiences
- Afraid adults will not meet their needs
- Trying to avoid being seen as disloyal to parents
- Afraid to show gratitude as a weakness
- Scared of attachment to caregiver

- Fearful of change
- Afraid
- Overwhelmed
- Distressed
- Needing affirmation
- Invalidated
- Unworthy
- Unsafe

**NARCISSISTIC**

- Scared of not getting their needs met
- Fear of being alone or disapproved of
- Needing to be rewarded or praised as the best
- May lack empathy modelling or ability to express empathy
- May lack ability to self soothe

- Needing nurture
- Fearful
- Competitive
- Needing connection
- Mistrusting of others
- Isolated
- Self-sufficient
- Unloved

**INAPPROPRIATE  
HUMOUR**

- Unable to understand social cues
- Feeling that people will not like them
- Disconnection or disassociation from painful memories/thoughts
- May have missed chance to mirror emotions with a safe adult

- Overcompensating
- Need to 'act' a part
- Needing belonging
- Trying to engage
- Relieving pressure

**INTIMIDATING**

- Re-enacting patterns of relying on self for safety
- Lacking interpersonal skills or needing to test the relationship

- Threatened
- Creating predictability
- Self-protective
- Testing relationship
- Isolated
- Alone
- Distressed

**CONTROLLING**

- May have needed to be the caregiver in the past
- Fear of adults or of connection
- Creating predictability
- Struggling with novelty and spontaneity
- Attempting to seek power over their circumstances

- Organised
- Needing familiarity
- Needing boundaries
- Needing predictability

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<p><b>FIDGETING OR UNSETTLED</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Needing adults to help them regulate their emotions</li> <li>• Needing to disassociate from memories, thoughts and triggers</li> <li>• Bodily reaction to a state of dysregulation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overwhelmed</li> <li>• Self soothing</li> <li>• Needing nurture</li> <li>• Anxious</li> <li>• Distressed</li> </ul>
<p><b>FORGETFUL OR DISORGANISED</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May be a dissociative state</li> <li>• May be hypo-arousal in the context of a trauma trigger</li> <li>• Response to inappropriate expectations of adults or older children</li> <li>• A reflection of the impact of trauma on memory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overwhelmed</li> <li>• Scared</li> <li>• Stressed</li> <li>• Needing support</li> <li>• Threatened</li> <li>• Needing more structure and predictability</li> </ul>
<p><b>BABY TALK</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May have experienced early loss of nurture and attachment</li> <li>• May believe they need to be cute to be loveable</li> <li>• May be regressing to an age before they experienced abuse</li> <li>• May not know appropriate ways to connect with others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Needing nurture</li> <li>• Needing connection</li> <li>• Afraid of abandonment</li> <li>• Overwhelmed</li> <li>• Needing comfort</li> <li>• Needing validation</li> </ul>
<p><b>IGNORING ROUTINES</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early failure of nurture leading to body dissociation</li> <li>• Bedtime may have been unsafe in the past</li> <li>• Fear of abandonment or lack of care</li> <li>• Inability to feel full because of not being fed</li> <li>• Difficulty regulating fatigue/hunger systems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overwhelmed</li> <li>• Sensorily overwhelmed</li> <li>• Needing connection</li> <li>• Hungry</li> <li>• Overstimulated</li> <li>• Needing structure</li> <li>• Needing predictability</li> </ul>
<p><b>CLINGY</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Needing to know where adults are</li> <li>• Fear of abandonment or being forgotten</li> <li>• Feeling unworthy of love or of being inferior</li> <li>• Attempting to maintain relationship with primary adult</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Afraid</li> <li>• Needing nurture and reassurance</li> <li>• Needing comfort</li> <li>• Needing to be validated</li> <li>• Needing connection</li> </ul>