
Language that cares

Changing the way professionals talk about
Children in Care




This project was led by Sara Ortiz, TACT Senior Research and Policy Advisor and TACT children and care experienced young people, with contributions from:

Blackpool Children in Care Council 

Bristol Children in Care Council 

Cheshire East Children in Care Council 

London and South East branch of Clinicians and Professionals working with Looked After and Adopted Children 

East Sussex Children in Care Council 

Herefordshire Your Voice Matters Group 

Rotherham Looked After Children's Council 

South Tyneside Children in Care Council 

Team Fostering 'Teamies' and Foster carers 

Waltham Forest Children and Young People 

Warwickshire Children in Care Council 



West Berkshires Children and Young People in Care and Social Care Professionals 

York Children in Care Council 

Endorsed by The Children's Society 

Foreword by Andy Elvin, TACT CEO

"We are not mistakes on pages, we are awesome novels with unorthodox beginnings."

TACT ambassador Solomon OB.

Language That Cares is a collaborative effort led by TACT that aims to change the language of the care system. Language is a powerful tool for communication but sometimes the way that it is used in social care creates stigma and barriers for understanding. Language is power, and we want children and young people to feel empowered in their care experience.

Why has this language evolved? The reasons are varied but one respondent put it very well:

"Why we use these terms? It might be that it gives us a sense of control, reducing a complex situation into something that you can describe neatly and respond to or that it decreases our feeling regarding perceived risk, being able to name a difficulty or threat reduces the danger of an unknowable threat. It can offer a disguise for when we don't know, or we don't understand and defends us against an intolerable/unpleasant feeling."
Professional

Language can be a weapon but it can also be emotional armour.

We have asked children and young people about their wishes and feelings on the day to day language used with, or to talk about, them and Language That Cares is their work.

Language That Cares is not an absolute list of all words used in the care system and does not represent everyone's view. However, it starts a much necessary discussion about the way we communicate and engage with our children and young people.

Language evolves and changes and this is the 'first edition' of Language That Cares. We will all continue to consult with our children and young people about the language we use. We also hope that more Local Authorities and organisations will join us for future editions and, together, we can show our children and young people that we really care about them and about what they have to say to us.

I will leave the last word to some of the care experienced young people who created Language That Cares:

"The language of care is so mixed up with our everyday language that it is difficult to separate the two. These words that we challenge are used by everyone: foster carers, social workers, teachers, Independent Reviewing Officers, administrators and even children and young people. We should challenge ourselves and challenge people who we hear using them." Rotherham Young People

Ashleigh, TACT care experienced young person

I think the new dictionary of the words and phrases used by professionals like social workers is really helpful, because some words used in the care system can be really complicated at times. Professionals' vocabulary would confuse me even when I was 15, I was still a bit puzzled by what was being said during my meetings, because it seemed to be all in some kind of professional, social worker code. Therefore, I can only imagine how confusing it must be for younger children to understand it all.

Professionals need to understand that not everyone speaks the same language as them, and for children it can feel complex and overwhelming, and sometimes even embarrassing, as there is a lot of stigma attached to some of the terms used by professionals.

Using alternatives to the word 'foster carer' is a good idea, because from personal experience I only referred to my carer by her name, or just saying my foster mum, because it seemed easier and it was more personal. Also, with regard to the term 'care leaver', I think changing it is really positive, because there is some stigma attached to 'care leaver', as it just feels like you've left care and that's it, there is nothing else to you or your life. Personally, when I say to people that I'm a care leaver they kind of just think of me through the usual perception of what someone in care looks like, and it's difficult to explain that it's different for every care leaver.

I also agree with changing the word 'peers' to 'friends'. When I was a child, my social worker would always call my friends peers, but I didn't really know what peers were at the time, and I'd never really heard anyone use that word before.

In general the words chosen by the young people in the new dictionary are helpful but at the same time they could make it difficult for professionals, like social workers, who need to use professional language in their work. However, I believe social workers and other care professionals should leave the big words for other professionals who understand them, and adopt the words provided in the new dictionary when talking to both young people and children and make the language they use around them more accessible, clear and sensitive.



A

Abscond

We prefer: **Run away; Go missing**

Advocate

"Says what it is but it might need explaining to some children and young people."
Cheshire East Young People

Asylum seeker

We prefer: **Young people**

"Asylum seeker is a home office term, these young people are much more than a Home Office label." Social Worker

B

Birth/Biological Parents

We prefer: **Parents; Family; Mum or Tummy Mummy; Dad**

"You should access each child individually to find out what they like calling their family members." Cheshire East Young Person

"The words can also be excluding and disadvantageous to birth parents and it is important for this to be considered as well." Foster Carer

C

Care leaver

We prefer: **Care experienced adult**

"We prefer 'care experienced' but we are not always keen on the word 'care' as this can mean anything due to 'care' having a wide definition." Cheshire East Young People

Care plan

We prefer: **Future plans; My plan**

"The word 'care' needs less usage, it is used too commonly, and I am fed up of hearing it." Cheshire East Young Person

Challenging Behaviour

We prefer: **Having trouble coping; Distressed feelings; Different thinking method; Difficult thoughts**

"Children and young people who are finding coping tough are not 'challenging' they are in need of your help and support." Social Worker

Consistent guide

We prefer: **Constant support**

"When we fall, you will catch us and help us get back on track."
Cheshire East Young People

Contact

We prefer: **Making plans to see our family; Family meet up time/Family time; Seeing Dad/Mum/Grandma/etc.**

"Contact should be changed to meeting with friends and family!"
Waltham Forest Young Person

"I would prefer 'seeing family'. Seeing family is normal for anyone but 'contact' makes it sound like it's not normal." York Care Leavers Forum

"Contact means staying in touch with the people that you care about."
Waltham Forest Young People

"For me it would be 'golden time', because seeing your family is golden and it's the best time." TACT Young Person

Contact centre

We prefer: **Family centre**

D

Designated Teacher

We prefer: **Teacher**

"Just say it's a teacher we can talk to, who is trained and who attends our reviews. The word is too obvious, we don't want everyone knowing." Cheshire East Young People



Difficult to place

We prefer: **Can't find a home good enough for them; Failed by the system**

"The phrase 'difficult to place' blames the child for a failure of the system."
Charity Social Worker

Drop out

We prefer: **Early school leaver**

F

Foster carers

We prefer: **My family; Foster Mum; Foster Dad; People who care about me; My new family; The family that chose us; Aunty/Uncle; Their name**

"The use of language is at a very individual level, so a term used for one child may not be right for another. Children use different words in different contexts, they may call foster carer 'Mum or Dad' in one situation but not in another. Foster carers and the children they look after need to work this out between them." Foster Carer

Full potential

We prefer: **You will make sure I have every chance to achieve my dreams**

H

High aspirations

We prefer: **Good choices; Wanting the best for our children**

"You will try your best to help me because you want me to achieve."
Cheshire East Young People

I

In care

We prefer: **Another home away from home; Living with a different family in a different home**

Isolation

We prefer: **Reflection time**

"I really dislike this term. It should not be in existence as it is punitive in its nature."
Professional

L

LAC review

We prefer: **My meeting or my review meeting; Improving your time in care; [Child's name]'s Review**

"It is your time to speak up and talk about what is happening or what's happened, what is good and what is bad." Waltham Forest Young People

LAC visit

We prefer: **Home visit; [Child's name] visit; Catch up**

LAC/Foster child

We prefer: **Call children by their names; LA should say 'our children' or [insert name of LA]'s children; Young People or Children**

"Every child is 'looked after'; there is no need to point us out. Some would consider themselves looked after before coming into care." Cheshire East Young People

"I do not mind the saying, but just don't say it a lot." York Young Person

"The acronym 'LAC' can be understood as a suggestion that the child or young person is 'lacking' something." Professional

"Take away LAC acronym completely." Herefordshire Young People

Leaving care

We prefer: **Moving on or Moving up**

M

Moving placements

We prefer: **Moving to a new house; A new chapter or fresh start**

N

NEET

We prefer: **Unemployed or not in training or in education**

"NEET is a silly word, no young person knows what it means yet we are called it."
Warwickshire Young People

P

PA

We prefer: **Advisor; Personal advisor; Guidance giver**

Pathway plan

We prefer: **Future planning for 16+; Leaving care plan; Path to independence**

Peers

We prefer: **Friends**

PEP

We prefer: **School review; Education meeting; Education plan**

"It is not about the word 'PEP' itself, it is how it is presented in school. Some teachers openly announce in class that the LAC student has a PEP meeting and this will arouse the interest from the rest of students, leaving the looked after student to explain what it is and why they have it." Rotherham Young People

Permanence

We prefer: **My home without disruptions**

Placement

We prefer: **Our home or home; My house or the house where I live**

"Placement sounds like you are being forced to live there." TACT Young Person

"I don't like when they say, 'you are a normal child living in someone else's home' or when they use the term 'child in care.'" Bristol Young Person

"This should be a word used more for a temporary placement, not when you see it as your home and have been there a long time." York Young Person

"A foster home might be somewhere where you're placed against your will, but that doesn't stop it from being a home." York Care Leavers Forum

"We should talk about 'foster homes' and not 'placements', particularly when children themselves are referred to as placements." Foster Carer

R

Respite

We prefer: **A break for children (not carers); Day out; Home away from home; Stay over/ Stay over family; Sleepover; Time off/Time off for us/Time off for our carers**

"This word does not make much sense. It is too formal and not a word we use everyday." York Young People

"It can be offensive as it means an escape or a break from something that is not enjoyable." York Young People

Restrained

We prefer: **Physical help to stay safe**

Reunification

We prefer: **Going back to live with my family; Going back home**

S

Siblings

We prefer: **Our brothers and sisters; People who are related to me**

"This is too formal, and it is ok in written language but in spoken language I think it should just be brothers and sisters." York Young Person

Sick

We prefer: **Unwell**

"I don't like when they say that my Mum is sick, I would rather they say Mum is unwell." Bristol Young Person

Social worker

We prefer: **One to one worker; Someone who understands your family background and knows what you have been through**

Special needs

We prefer: **Additionally supported; The needs name, i.e. disabled, global developmental delay, learning need, etc.**

"Everyone is special, and everyone has different levels of need."
Warwickshire Young People

Staff, Support worker, Unit manager

We prefer: **Their name**

"Explain their role but use their name to refer to them." Professional

Stat visit/Statutory visit

We prefer: **Coming to visit to see how we're doing**

"I didn't know what a stat visit is. For me it is when my social worker just comes around, so I do not feel there has to be a specific word for it." York Care Leavers Forum

T

Therapy

We prefer: **Talking things through sessions; Trying to make sense sessions; Help to work things out**

Transition

We prefer: **Preparing for change**





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