Factsheet 2: Using appropriate language and framing

When talking with a carer about PHSB, it is important to use clear language that acknowledges the behaviour without shaming, isolating or stigmatising the child or young person involved.[1] In your initial conversations with carers, consider discussing what language you will all use when talking about the behaviour. This includes what age-appropriate language will be used when talking directly with the child or young person with problematic or harmful sexual behaviour.

Clarifying language can help carers feel more at ease in subsequent discussions. It can also provide them with the 'words' they can use as a family. Your own use of appropriate language is also important, as it models examples for carers.

Conversation tip	Examples in practice
Talk about why language and framing are important.	*Bailey is likely already feeling a lot of shame, guilt, or confusion about what has happened. This is a normal response, but we want to make sure we don't add to those feelings, so the language we use when we have conversations about this is really important. Let's work together to come up with some words that are going to work for you and your family.*
Discuss the need for consistent language that: • emphasises that the child or young person is, first and foremost, a child • labels the sexual behaviour as problematic, rather than the child or young person themselves.[2]	*We want to make sure that Bailey doesn't think he's a bad person because of what he did. It's important that we use language that makes it clear that it is the behaviour that is the problem, not Bailey.* *This means naming the behaviour accurately in our conversations with Bailey—most experts agree that something like "problematic or harmful sexual behaviour" is best. How does that wording feel for you?*
Emphasise the importance of using words that are developmentally appropriate, including with the child or young person.[3]	*Because Bailey is young it's important that we avoid using words that are typically used for adults like 'perpetrator', 'abuser', 'predator', or 'sex offender'. We know that, with the right support, it's unlikely that Bailey will repeat this behaviour, so it's important that we use words that reflect this.* **If there are other children in the home that are aware of the behaviour**: *[Other children/young people] might know some of these words from school or friends, and it's important that you're clear with them about what language is and isn't okay to use when talking about Bailey. Do you feel able to have a conversation with [other children/young people] about that?* *(Alternatively, offer to support carers in having this conversation with other children/young people, if appropriate).*

Conversation tip	Examples in practice
Support carers and children to jointly decide on age-appropriate language that they can use to describe the behaviour. Encourage carers to share the chosen language for referring to the PHSB with others who support the child or young person. Consistent language is important, as it can reduce confusion for the child or young person. The language you support carers to choose will also need to consider the context in which the behaviour occurred. For example, 'the touching problem' would be inappropriate where the child or young person has engaged in PHSB online. Examples of appropriate language include: • The touching problem[4] • Harmful decision • Hurtful behaviour • Problematic behaviour • Harmful sexual behaviour	*I'm thinking about how we're going to talk to Bailey about what has happened. Have you used or thought of any words that could work for him?* *It would be helpful to talk to Bailey about what words make him feel most comfortable. Do you feel able to have a conversation with him about that before I visit next?* (Alternatively, offer to support carers in having this conversation with child or young person with harmful sexual behaviour, if appropriate). **If a carer/child/young person is struggling to come up with appropriate language**: Children Alex's age might feel more comfortable referring to the harmful sexual behaviour as "the touching problem"[5]. Could you check in with Alex to see if that feels okay for her? **If the PHSB is pre-existing**: *Are there words that other people in Bailey's life (like the school or other professionals) already use to describe the behaviour? Let's make sure we all use the same words so that Bailey always knows what we are talking about.*
If necessary, address the use of language that minimises the seriousness of the PHSB with the carer. Whether or not language is considered minimising will depend upon the age of the child with PHSB (e.g., "the touching problem" may be considered appropriate for a 4-year-old, but minimising when referring to harmful sexual behaviour by an adolescent).[6]	**If carer is using minimising language when discussing the PHSB**: *It's great that you're already having conversations with Alex about her harmful sexual behaviour. I'm worried that when you describe Alex's behaviour as "teasing" she might think that this means the behaviour is not serious. Can we work together to come up with some language that makes it clear to Alex that this behaviour is not appropriate?* **If the carer is leaning towards minimising language in the process of deciding on what language to use**: *I can see you're really thinking about making sure Bailey doesn't feel ashamed or upset as a result of the words we use. I love seeing how much you care about Bailey and it's clear that you want to support him. I want us to find a balance between reducing those feelings for Bailey and making sure they still know this is serious. What about something like…*

1 Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS). (2020)

2 Hackett (2014); NSW Government, Family and Community Services. (2016)

3 Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS). (2020); Government of South Australia, Department for Child Protection. (2020)

4 NSW Government, Family and Community Services. (2016)

5 NSW Government, Family and Community Services. (2016)

6 NSW Government, Family and Community Services. (2016)