Words Matter

A Guide to Respectful and Accurate Communication About Child Sexual Abuse

CHANGE the conversation.

Preventing and Healing Child Sexual Abuse.

Why This Guide Matters

Ending the silence around child sexual abuse (CSA) starts with changing how we talk about it.

At Change the Conversation, we believe that language can be a powerful tool for creating environments of safety and support. When talking about CSA, it's important to actively choose vocabulary and language that supports survivors, dispels myths, and helps to prevent abuse.

This guide exists because **abuse thrives in silence**. When we use outdated, harmful, or inaccurate language, we perpetuate the shame and stigma that keep survivors isolated and prevent communities from taking action to fight CSA. By changing our words, we can literally change the conversation around child sexual abuse.

Our commitment: We use language that is positive, sensitive, approachable, and reflective of our organizational values of empathy, learning, growth, support, and integrity.

Core Principles for Respectful Communication

Person-First Language

- Focus on the person's humanity, not their experience of abuse
- Avoid labels that define someone by what happened to them

Accuracy Over Ambiguity

- Use clear, appropriate terms rather than vague language
- Choose medically and legally accurate language and terms

Trauma-Informed Approach

- Use hopeful language that focuses on empowerment and healing
- Discard language that implies permanent damage or brokenness

Your words have power. By choosing language that is respectful, accurate, and supportive, you become part of the solution. Every conversation is an opportunity to challenge harmful myths and create a safer world.

Remember: This guide is a living document. Language evolves, and so should our understanding. We encourage feedback and are committed to continuous learning and growth.

Words Matter

Start Changing the Conversation

When Talking About Survivors

– INSTEAD OF	– SAY THIS
"They were abused." or "abuse victim"	"They experienced sexual abuse." or "They are a survivor of abuse."
Why: Person-first language emphasizes the individual's humanity over their experience.	

– INSTEAD OF	– SAY THIS
"His/her/their life is ruined."	"People who experience sexual abuse may be at increased risk of unique challenges."
Why: Avoids bleak or discouraging language and acknowledges that not every individual who experiences sexual abuse will inevitably struggle.	

– INSTEAD OF	– SAY THIS
"Why didn't they tell someone sooner?"	"The average age for disclosing CSA is about 52 years; it takes courage to disclose."
Why: Recognizes the barriers to disclosure and honors the survivor's experience.	

When Discussing Perpetrators

– INSTEAD OF	– SAY THIS
"Stranger danger" or "monsters"	"Most people who sexually abuse children are known and trusted by the child and their family."
Why: Avoids creating unnecessary fear and reflects the reality that up to 90% of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by someone known to the child.	

– INSTEAD OF	– SAY THIS
"Predators lurking around the corner"	"Abusers often use grooming tactics that gradually increase their unsupervised access to children."
Why: Educates about the actual tactics used by those who abuse children.	

When Talking About Bodies

– INSTEAD OF	– SAY THIS
Nicknames for anatomy like "down there," or other "child-friendly" terms	Anatomically correct terms such as penis, vagina, anus etc.
Why: Proper terminology empowers children to communicate clearly and removes shame from talking about bodies.	

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When Addressing Prevention

– INSTEAD OF	– SAY THIS
"Don't talk to strangers."	"Trust your feelings and tell a trusted adult if someone makes you uncomfortable."

Why: Empowers children to recognize uncomfortable situations, regardless of who is involved.

When Discussing Healing

– INSTEAD OF	– SAY THIS
"You have to move forward and/or move on."	"Healing is different for everyone and happens at your own pace."

Why: Respects individual healing journeys without imposing timelines.

– INSTEAD OF	– SAY THIS
"You have to forgive to heal."	"Healing is a personal journey, and forgiveness may or may not be part of that process."

Why: Removes pressure and honors individual choice in healing.

Addressing Common Microaggressions

– INSTEAD OF	– SAY THIS
• **"If parents were paying more attention, this wouldn't happen."** • **"I can't believe they didn't tell anyone sooner."** • **"At least it wasn't violent."** (This minimizes non-violent and non-physical abuse.) • **"Everything happens for a reason."** • **"You're so strong/brave."** (This can feel performative and/or condescending, and often either leaves the survivor feeling misunderstood and/or puts pressure on the survivor to continue acting "strong/brave".)	• **"Thank you for sharing that with me."** • **"I'm sorry you experienced that."** • **"How can we best support you?"** • **"Everyone responds differently to trauma."** • **"I'm sure there are many reasons why it may not have felt safe to speak up sooner."**

TERMS TO RETIRE COMPLETELY

- "Stranger danger"
- "Child pornography" → Use "child sexual abuse material" or "sexually explicit material involving children"
- "Broken" or "damaged"
- "Lost innocence"
- "Asking for it"
- "Boys don't get abused"
- "Real abuse" (implying that some experiences of abuse aren't valid)

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Engage Different Audiences

For Parents and Caregivers

- Emphasize body safety, empowerment, and protection rather than fear.
- Use language that encourages open communication with trusted adults.
- Focus on building an environment of safety as a trusted adult by thoughtfully responding to questions, comments, and situations.

For Educators and Professionals

- Emphasize reporting obligations while maintaining sensitivity.
- Focus on creating safe environments for disclosure.

For Community Members

- Address myths and misconceptions with facts.
- Use language that encourages community responsibility.
- Avoid sensationalizing or dramatizing publicized cases or sexual abuse in general.

Use Professional Language

Legal and Medical Terms

- Child Sexual Abuse (CSA)
- Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)
- Non-offending caregiver
- Trauma-informed care
- Mandated reporter
- Forensic interview
- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Therapeutic Language

- Trauma response (not "overreacting")
- Healing journey (not "recovery process")
- Coping strategies (not "dealing with it")
- Therapeutic relationship
- Processing trauma
- Building resilience

Contact us if you have questions about appropriate language or would like training for your organization. Together, we can change the conversation and create safer communities for all children.

This guide reflects our organizational commitment to using language that is positive, sensitive, and approachable—because every word matters in our mission to prevent and heal from child sexual abuse.

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Trainings Resources