

**BE
AWARE
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THERE**

Exploitation
is happening
in Norfolk

Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (CSEA): An appropriate language guide for professionals

October 2025



Norfolk County Council

[knowthesigns.info](https://www.knowthesigns.info)

What is victim blaming language?

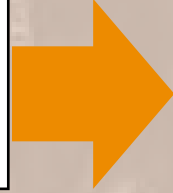
Victim blaming language refers to any language that implies, intentionally or unintentionally, that a victim is responsible for the abuse they have experienced. The language we use is shaped and normalised within the cultures we work, live and spend time in. As language evolves, phrases that were once commonly accepted may no longer be appropriate. Therefore, it is crucial to maintain an open and reflective attitude to make sure that our language evolves in a way that supports and respects all individuals.

The Children's Society /napac / Child Sexual Exploitation Taskforce

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The language used by professionals and society reinforces the shame and guilt felt by victim or survivor



This can embolden abusers and isolate victims, reaffirming –
'us and them'



This can create a barrier between the victim and safeguarding professionals:
'They won't believe me'



The abuser uses this to their advantage creating distance between the victim and those who can help.

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Victims and survivors hear from abusers.....

No one will believe you

No one else cares

You can't trust anyone

It's your fault

Victims and survivors hear from professionals.....

They're being uncooperative

They're in a relationship

It was their choice

They took the money

Victims and survivors hear from society.....

Victims or survivor is made to feel....

They're pretending to care

They think it's my fault

It'll get worse if I try to get out

Nobody will believe me, nothing
will change

I can't trust anyone

They're a troublemaker

They were asking for it

Why didn't they leave or fight back

Where were the parents

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Any child can be a victim

Age

- Is the victim a child? ***Children can not consent to their own abuse***
- If the child is transitioning into adulthood, is their recognition that they don't stop being a victim once they turn 18?

Race

- Has the child been adultified because of assumptions and/or biases about their race and therefore the child is not recognised as a victim?
- Does the child or person's race impact on whether professionals to believe they are complicit in criminal activity, race of the child, or abuser cause professional reluctance to investigate claims due to fears of being perceived as racist? (Casey report June 2025)

Socio- economic background

- Does this socio-economic background of the child or person impact whether they are viewed as a victim, or seen to be complicit in the abuse or crimes that may have been committed?
- Does the socio-economic background of the abuser impact whether the victim is believed, or dismissed?

Trauma

- Might the child be experiencing trauma which may impact how they engage with professionals?
- Is our professional experience causing compassion fatigue? If so, could this be impacting our perception of and response to victims?

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Speaking with victims of exploitation and abuse

Below are some key considerations when speaking with victims of exploitation or abuse:

- Create an environment where the young person feels comfortable and safe.
- Be aware of your body language , non-verbal cues, and tone of voice.
- Provide opportunities for a child to make choices.
- Provide opportunities for the voice of the child to be heard.
- Ask open questions with sensitivity
- Where possible, avoid the child or person having to repeat their story multiple times.
- Avoid judgemental and intimate questions.
- Take an intersectional approach to the child / victim. For example, how might their gender, class or culture impact their experiences?
- Be sensitive to previous negative experiences the child / victim may have had with professionals, or those who hold a position of authority.
- Move at the child / victim's pace so that they can process what is being said and have time to form their responses.
- Communicate the next steps and keep them updated.

Remember: While this may be something you work with and discuss every day, this may be their first time talking about these experiences and they should be treated with empathy and respect.

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Appropriate language

Term	Impact	Alternative
Boyfriend / girlfriend or in a relationship with	Could imply a consensual relationship and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context, including imbalance of power or coercion and control.	Person says that they are in a relationship. However, there are concerns about consent due to the person's age, the imbalance of power, and/or indicators of exploitation and abuse.
Broken, damaged	Can be dehumanising for children and can deny hope for healing and recovery.	This child may have experienced trauma or experienced exploitation and needs support.
Chaotic lifestyle	This term can imply they are at fault for their lack of safety.	Not yet able to access effective support to enable them to work towards sustainable security or safety.
Drug dealing / running	Imply that the child has the capacity to make free and informed choice. They may not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.	Person has been targeted and is being groomed or made to distribute drugs.
Contacting adults online	Implies that the child or person was responsible for the communication.	Concerns that an adult is facilitating or seeking communication with person.

Appropriate language

Term	Impact	Alternative
Involved in...	Implies choice regarding person being abused.	The person is a victim of exploitation.
Mule	Dehumanising language describing children being exploited by criminal networks to perpetrate fraud / drug dealing.	Person was tricked or forced (exploited) to participate in fraud or drug dealing.
Plugging or stuffing	The informality of these terms does not reflect the reality of what is happening to the person.	Coerced or forced to conceal drugs.
Putting themselves at risk	Implies that the child or person is responsible for the risks presented by the abuser and that they can make free and informed choices without recognition of their age.	Lack of protective factors surrounding the person and they are being groomed or exploited.
Sextortion	Refers to online harm where exploiters obtain child sexual abuse material and use it to extort the child depicted.	The person is being or has been a victim of sexually coerced extortion or financially or emotionally motivated sexual extortion.

Appropriate language

Term	Impact	Alternative
Choosing this lifestyle	Implies that the child or person is responsible and has the capacity to make free and informed choice.	The child /person is a victim of exploitation.
Involved in a gang or criminality	Imply that the child / person is choosing or has capacity to choose being involved in organised crime / youth violence.	Person is being criminally exploited likely by an organised crime group.
Need to take responsibility for their behaviour.	Phrase may suggest that the child / person is making choices and poor decisions - but no child is responsible for their own exploitation.	Needs support to understand the complex nature of exploitation.
Not engaging with services	Fails to acknowledge a child's or person's previous or ongoing experience of engaging with services and may impact their perceptions and support.	Due to previous trauma the person has experienced they find it difficult to trust unknown adults or people in positions of power.
Young person is vulnerable	It is the situation surrounding the person rather than the person themselves that is the cause of the vulnerability.	Child / person could be in a vulnerable situation.

Adultification

Adultification happens when preconceptions held about children lead to them being treated and perceived as being more adult like. Adultification disproportionately affects black children, as evidenced in a number of serious case reviews in recent years. It perpetuates negative stereotypes and racism and can lead to significant safeguarding failures and being denied the protections typically afforded to children.

Key aspects of adultification include:

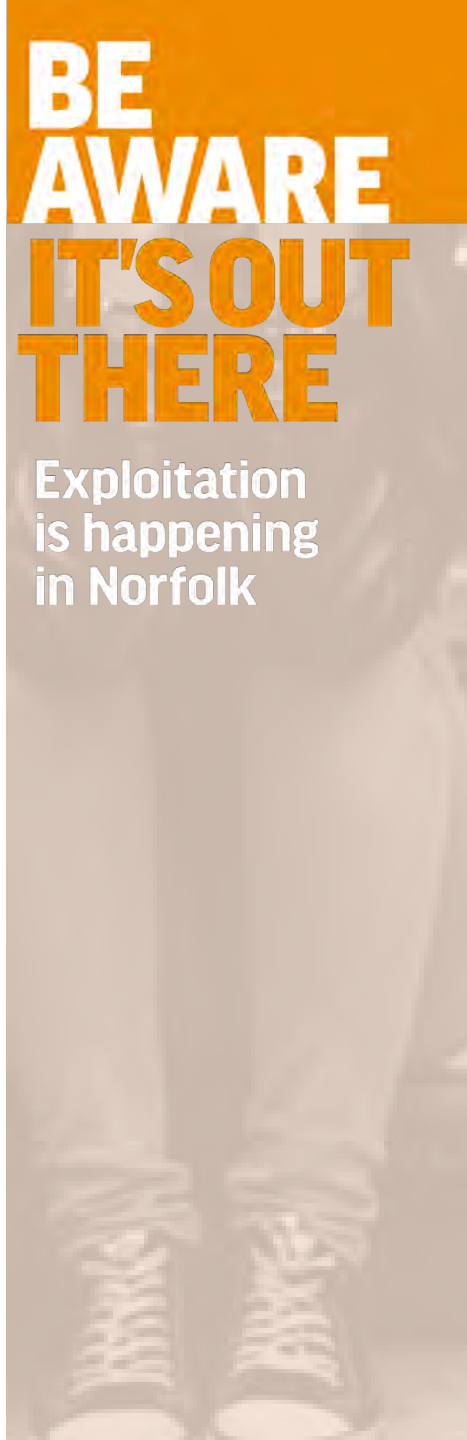
- Reduced empathy
- Higher expectations
- Misinterpretation of behaviour
- Denial of childhood

Common contexts:

- **Racial Bias:** Black children, especially black girls, are disproportionately affected by adultification bias in schools, policing and healthcare.
- **Gender bias:** Girls may be adultified through assumptions about their sexuality or emotional maturity.
- **Socioeconomic:** Children from low-income backgrounds may be expected to on adult roles prematurely.

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Child Q

The case of Child Q, a 15-year-old Black girl who was strip searched at school by police officers in March 2022 has prompted a series of key recommendations aimed at addressing adultification bias.

Key recommendations

1. Treat all children as children

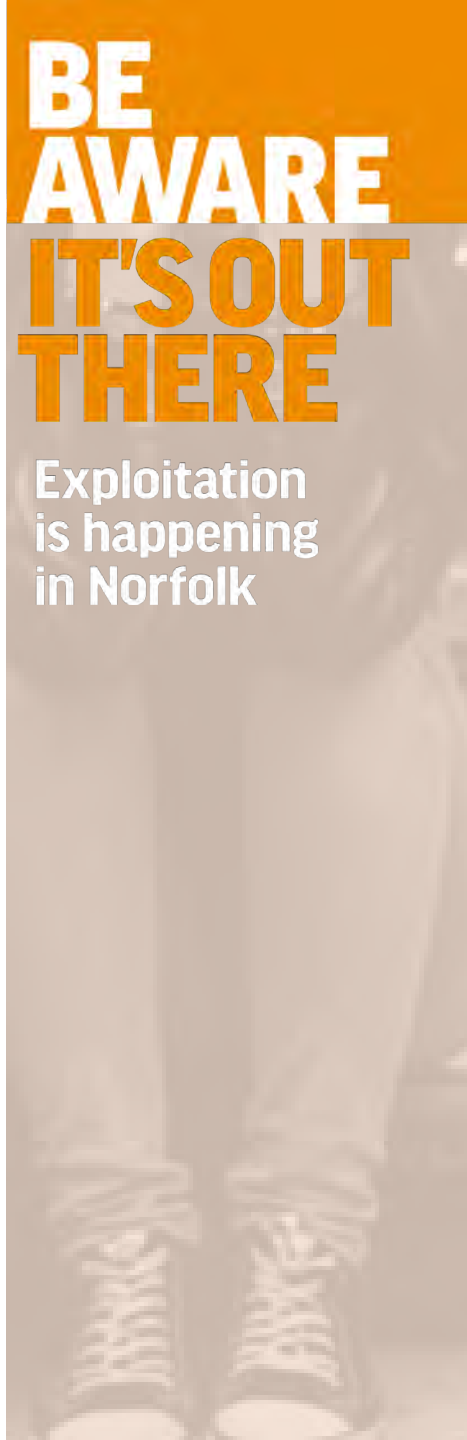
- Police, schools and safeguarding professionals must recognise and respond to children as children regardless of race, gender, or background.
- The children's commissioner emphasized that child Q was not treated as a child, and this failure stemmed from adultification bias.

2. Mandatory training on adultification and racial bias

- Recognising adultification bias.
- Understanding how racial stereotypes influence decision-making.
- Safeguarding responsibilities when interacting with children

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Child Q

Child-first Policing Approach

- A shift to a child-centered approach in policing (led by National Police Chiefs Council)
- This includes prioritising the welfare and safeguarding of children over enforcement, especially in cases involving Black children

Improved Safeguarding Protocols

Strip searches in schools should only occur when there is a clear and immediate risk of harm, and must be accompanied by:

- An Appropriate Adult present
- Full documentation and justification
- Consideration of the child's mental health and vulnerability

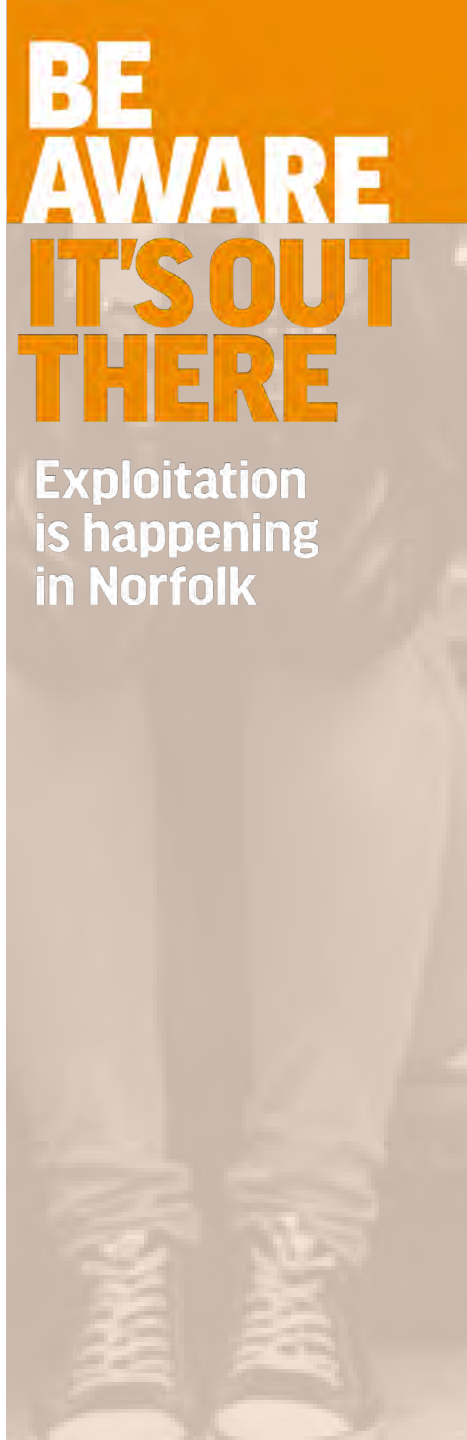
Beter data collection and monitoring

Police forces must record and report:

- The ethnicity and age and vulnerabilities of children searched
- Outcomes and safeguarding referrals (CPIs)
- This data is essential to monitor and address racial disparities and adultification trends.

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Making a Difference
Norfolk

Making a Difference

In 2025 Norfolk Constabulary launched a new vulnerability campaign called 'Making a Difference'. Aimed at officers and staff to improve how we protect vulnerable people and promote a culture where safeguarding is everyone's business.

The Making a Difference campaign has put vulnerable people – particularly children and young people – at the heart of one question: What difference will you make today?

Every time a child is seen by Police or affected by an issue that attracts police interest is an opportunity to see life from their perspective, be in their shoes, check on their safety and try to improve their lives.

The use of appropriate language when engaging with children and young people directly makes a difference by influencing trust, emotional safety and the effectiveness of any intervention. This helps create a safe environment where young people feel heard and understood and which is crucial for gathering accurate information, supporting their welfare and building trusted relationships.





Every child deserves to be seen, heard and spoken to with respect – our words can make the difference.

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