

Practice issues from Serious Case Reviews

13. Euphemistic language in reports and written records

What is the issue?

Professionals using euphemistic or misleading language in reports and written records, which hinders communication

.....

Written reports and case records are an important form of communication, and also contribute to building up the history and narrative of a case. We found examples where professionals' choice of language in written reports did not adequately capture what was happening in a case, for example a house with dog faeces smeared on the walls being described as 'grubby'.

In one case a young person was described, by her mother, as having 15–20 'sexual partners'. This was reported without question alongside statements by the young person that she had 'consented' to sex. Professionals also talked about 'allegations of rape', rather than seeing this as a disclosure of sexual abuse or exploitation.

What are the underlying reasons?

.....

In the **SCR report** in which this issue was analysed in detail, the reason why language was not examined, reported or challenged critically was thought to be professionals perceiving themselves to be reporting in a 'child centred' manner. The SCR stated that:

The Review Team and Case Group told us that it was common practice across all agencies to record what children and young people told them uncritically, in the context of early sexual experiences. They considered that professionals understood the importance of recording what young people told them as a way of being child centred.

This document is one of a set of 14 briefings intended to support managers, senior managers and practitioners by:

- identifying difficult issues in multi-agency safeguarding work, focusing on interprofessional communication and decision-making
- exploring why these issues arise, and therefore how they might be addressed.

The briefings are based on analysis of 38 Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) published between May 2014 and April 2015, augmented by information gathered from multi-agency summits in London, Leeds and Birmingham. The summits were held in September 2015 and were attended by 194 practitioners and managers from across children's social care, health, education, police, probation and Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs).

The briefings are the result of a pilot process that developed and tested new ways that SCR findings can be shared and used to support improvement.

Later, the SCR notes that:

The danger of the lack of challenge and analysis is that it can appear that professionals agree with the negative ideas behind the language used, which in this case they did not, but this needed articulating in the records.

Participants at the three summits also identified a number of underlying reasons for this issue including the following:

Fear of upsetting or damaging relationships with families

The worry of reports being shared or read by parents was seen as a driver for professionals to write euphemistically. Participants noted that this was an unintended consequence of the decision to allow families full access to their records. One participant said:

'Reports are very carefully written because the professional knows that they will need to have ongoing contact with the family and are wary of upsetting them.' (Safeguarding Manager)

There was also some suggestion that reports were written with the idea of 'covering' the professional.

Perceptions of what constitutes 'professional' writing, including use of 'umbrella terms'

The question was raised by participants as to whether a certain style of writing, and use of particular phrases, was considered to be 'professional'. One participant said:

'Frontline staff are trying to write "professional" because that is how they thought they were supposed to, it was just meaningless.' (Safeguarding Board Manager)

Participants identified that there is a professional norm of using 'umbrella terms' such as 'neglect', rather than more descriptive terms such as 'going to bed hungry'.

Language as a means of 'sanitising' situations

Euphemistic language was also recognised by participants as a way of 'sanitising' uncomfortable situations, with the result that meaning was not accurately conveyed. One participant said:

'We are sanitising it for ourselves and this has the effect of removing the focus from what is actually happening to the child.' (Named Nurse)

This person gave the example of a case in which a young person was described as 'downloading inappropriate images'. This description did not adequately capture the seriousness of the behaviour, and the risk it implied. Another participant noted:

'I had a recent referral from a schoolteacher, about human trafficking, but the teacher ... was too afraid to say what it is, so did an indirect referral and skirted round the issue.' (Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub – MASH – Social Worker)

Lack of professional challenge

Although participants readily acknowledge the use of euphemistic terminology in reporting there was also the appreciation that professionals did not challenge this, or the fact that different professionals used different and often confusing language in reports. One participant described this use as akin to 'the emperor's new clothes' and said that:

'People are embarrassed to say "I don't understand what you mean".' (Named Nurse)

Solutions suggested by summit participants

.....

Participants at the summits suggested the following possible solutions:

- review of case records of girls involved in child sexual exploitation – this highlighted the tendency to use words such as 'promiscuous', 'presenting with STDs' and so on
- using the Signs of Safety model, in particular elements of the framework about checking that family members understand what you are saying.

Questions for you to consider

Unpicking the issue

1. Is this issue familiar to you?
2. Locally, is the issue exactly the same as described above? If not, what does this issue 'look like' for you?
3. What good practice is there in relation to this issue? Are there weaknesses you are aware of and how would you describe them?

Why do you think this happens in your local area?

1. Do some or all of the reasons described above apply in your area?
2. Is it an issue that has been identified in local SCRs, audits or inspection feedback? What light have these activities shed on the issue?
3. What knowledge do you have from your own experience about why this happens?
4. What organisational factors are involved locally?
5. How does local culture, custom and practice, within and between agencies, contribute to this?

Thinking through the solutions

1. Have there been previous efforts locally to address this issue? What was the result?
2. Given your understanding of the reasons for this issue, what further actions do you think would be helpful in addressing it?
3. What strengths can you build on, and what are the areas of difficulty?
4. What action would need to be taken at a strategic or leadership level?
5. Who would need to be involved to achieve improvement?
6. Are there any unintended consequences you anticipate for the different agencies and professions involved?
7. How will you know whether any actions have had an impact?

This briefing was produced as part of Learning into Practice, a one-year DfE funded project conducted by the NSPCC and SCIE between April 2015 and March 2016. For more information see nspcc.org.uk/lipp or scie.org.uk/lipp