Words Matter: Trauma sensitive language with children

Trauma
is expressed through behaviours not language
can mask fear or shame

Stress responses
are known as ‘fight’, ‘flight’, ‘freeze’ and ‘fawn’
can resemble anti-social behaviours

Negative language
blames children for their trauma
is internalised by children and leads to negative labels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferable language</th>
<th>What might be happening in the moment</th>
<th>Negatively charged language</th>
<th>Preferable language</th>
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<td>✅ Afraid</td>
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<td>✅ Afraid</td>
<td>• Testing strength of connection</td>
<td>✅ Anxious</td>
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<tr>
<td>✅ Frustrated</td>
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<td>✅ Seeking safety</td>
<td>• Sense of danger</td>
<td>✅ Testing</td>
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<tr>
<td>✅ Resourceful</td>
<td>• May be using early survival</td>
<td>✅ Distressed</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>✅ Self-soothing</td>
<td>patterns that previously kept them safe</td>
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<td>• Difficulty articulating feelings</td>
<td>✅ Lacking</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Attempting to keep adults distanced</td>
<td>✅ Confidence</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Seeking power when they feel endangered</td>
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Manipulative

Aggressive and oppositional

Disrespectful and rude

Defiant and ignorant

Disruptive

Risk taking

Negatively charged language

What might be happening in the moment

Disruptive

- Feeling unworthy of connection
- Avoiding a feeling of shame
- Feeling anxiety in the situation
- Attempting to regain mastery over a situation
- Attempting to compensate for poor social or learning skills

Risk taking

- Feeling unworthy or unvalued
- Trying to reduce distress
- May be self-regulating in the form of self-harm or risk to others
- Seeking power, approval or affirmation of strength

Aggressive and oppositional

- Feeling unworthy of love and attachment
- Feeling stuck in rigidity or chaos
- Divided loyalty and fear of betrayal
- Attempting to create a distraction or to protect themselves

Manipulative

- Feeling unworthy or unvalued
- Trying to reduce distress
- May be self-regulating in the form of self-harm or risk to others
- Seeking power, approval or affirmation of strength

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**Negative language**
blames children for their trauma is internalised by children and leads to negative labels

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**Preferable language**

- Afraid
- Fantasising
- Seeking nurture
- Confused
- Seeking acceptance

- Feeling powerless
- Avoiding a difficult truth
- Re-interpreting reality to alleviate shame
- Avoiding getting in trouble if that equates to physical harm

- Feeling scared for themselves or someone they love
- Needing to move body to help regulate sensory overload

- Appeasing may be a learnt strategy to keep adults happy and avoid being hurt
- Feeling excluded, unworthy or unloved
- Shutting out traumatic memories or thoughts
- May indicate cognitive processes are too hard to sustain
- Fear of expressing emotions

- Being small or unseen may have been an early survival strategy
- Feeling excluded, unworthy or unloved
- May indicate cognitive processes are too hard to sustain
- Fear of expressing emotions

- Fear of connecting or losing a connection
- Inability to trust due to past betrayal so push adults away
- May avoid relationships
- Needing to create predictability
- Needing to create power and control
- May mask a lack of skills for the task

**Negatively charged language**

- Liar and dishonest
- Steals
- Sabotages
- Sneaky
- Shut down

- Collecting items for self-preservation
- Wanting to impress peers
- Needing to feel reassured they exist
- Seeking a sense of control in environment
- Attempting to be in control with adults

- Fearful of connecting or losing a connection
- Inability to trust due to past betrayal so push adults away
- May avoid relationships
- Needing to create predictability
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**For more information contact:** Research Centre for Children and Families, Sydney School of Education and Social Work  
[research@sydney.edu.au](mailto:research@sydney.edu.au)  

Developed as part of the ARC Linkage project Fostering Lifelong Connections for Children in Permanent Care (LP180101332)
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**What might be happening in the moment**

**Preferable language**

- **Seeking closeness**
- **Seeking connection**
- **Anxious**
- **Afraid**

- **Afraid**
- **Organised**
- **Seeking familiarity**
- **Seeking boundaries**
- **Seeking predictability**

- **Afraid**
- **Creating predictability**
- **Self-protective**
- **Testing relationship**
- **Seeking power**

- **Re-enacting patterns of relying on self for safety**
- **Lacking interpersonal skills or needing to test the relationship**

- **Unmet need for connection or safety**
- **Needing to feel loved and nurtured**
- **Needing to feel seen, heard and valued**
- **Fearing disconnection in social and peer relationships**

- **May have needed to be the caregiver in the past**
- **Fear of adults or of connection**
- **Creating predictability**
- **Struggling with novelty and spontaneity**
- **Attempting to seek power over their circumstances**

- **May have blocked trust from past experiences**
- **Afraid adults will not meet their needs**
- **Trying to avoid being seen as disloyal to parents**
- **Afraid to show gratitude as a weakness**
- **Scared of attachment to caregiver**

- **Scared of not getting their needs met**
- **Fear of being alone or disapproved of**
- **Need to be rewarded or praised as the best**
- **May lack empathy modelling or ability to express empathy**
- **May lack ability to self soothe**

- **Unable to understand social cues**
- **Feeling that people will not like them**
- **Disconnection or disassociation from painful memories/thoughts**
- **May have missed chance to mirror emotions with a safe adult**

- **Overcompensating**
- **Need to ‘act’ a part**
- **Seeking belonging**

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**Preferable language**

- Overwhelmed
- Seeking soothing
- Seeking nurture
- Afraid
- Discomfort

**What might be happening in the moment**

- Needing adults to help them regulate their emotions
- Needing to disassociate from memories, thoughts and triggers
- Bodily reaction to a state of dysregulation

**Negatively charged language**

- Sensory overload may make processing hard
- Feeling unsafe with someone they see as a bully

**What might be happening in the moment**

- Overreacts or exaggerates

**Preferable language**

- Distressed
- Seeking nurture
- Seeking connection
- Overwhelmed

**Fidgeting or unsettled**

- Needing to know where adults are
- Fear of abandonment or being forgotten
- Feeling unworthy of love or of being inferior
- Attempting to maintain relationship with primary adult

**Overwhelmed**

-SZ

- Afraid
- Seeking nurture
- Seeking reassurance

- Overwhelmed
- Afraid
- Sensory overwhelmed
- Seeking connection
- Hungry
- Overstimulated

**Failure of routines**

- Early failure of nurture leading to body dissociation
- Bedtime may have been unsafe in the past
- Fear of abandonment or lack of care
- Inability to feel full because of not being fed
- Difficulty regulating fatigue/hunger systems

**Forgetful or disorganised**

- May have experienced early loss of nurture and attachment
- May believe they need to be cute to be loveable
- May be regressing to an age before they experienced abuse
- May not know appropriate ways to connect with others

**Clingy**

- May be a dissociative state
- May be hypo-arousal in the context of a trauma trigger
- Response to inappropriate expectations of adults or older children

**Overreacts or exaggerates**

- Sensory overload may make processing hard
- Feeling unsafe with someone they see as a bully

**Distressed**

- Seeking nurture
- Seeking connection
- Overwhelmed

**Baby talk**

- May be experiencing early loss of nurture and attachment
- May believe they need to be cute to be loveable
- May be regressing to an age before they experienced abuse
- May not know appropriate ways to connect with others

**Stressed**

- Seeking nurture
- Seeking connection
- Afraid of abandonment
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