

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

Preferable language

- ✓ Distressed
- ✓ Afraid
- ✓ Frustrated
- ✓ Testing relationship

What might be happening in the moment

- Urge to push bad feelings away
- Testing strength of connection
- Seeking belonging with peers
- Sense of shame
- Sense of danger

Negatively charged language

Disrespectful and rude

Defiant and ignorant

What might be happening in the moment

- Fearing separation from caregiver
- Fearing change or transitions
- Attempting to establish predictability
- Trying to predict adult behaviours

Preferable language

- ✓ Afraid
- ✓ Anxious
- ✓ Shutdown
- ✓ Seeking control
- ✓ Testing relationship

- ✓ Seeking safety
- ✓ Resourceful
- ✓ Self-soothing

- May be using early survival patterns that previously kept them safe
- Imitating early adult role models
- Difficulty articulating feelings
- Attempting to keep adults distanced
- Seeking power when they feel endangered

Manipulative

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

- ✓ Distressed
- ✓ Ashamed
- ✓ Lacking confidence
- ✓ Afraid
- ✓ Anxious
- ✓ Unhappy

- ✓ Distressed
- ✓ Afraid
- ✓ Over-stimulated

- 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

Aggressive and oppositional

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

- ✓ Seeking belonging
- ✓ Afraid
- ✓ Fear of loneliness
- ✓ Self-protection
- ✓ Limit testing

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

Preferable language

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

What might be happening in the moment

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

What might be happening in the moment

- Past patterns of self-reliance due to neglect
- 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

Preferable language

- ✓ Seeking connection
- ✓ Seeking belonging
- ✓ Seeking control
- ✓ Hungry

Negatively charged language

Liar and dishonest

Steals

Absconding

Sabotages

Shut down

Sneaky

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

- 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
- Needing to create power and control
- May mask a lack of skills for the task

- ✓ Self-protective
- ✓ Afraid
- ✓ Overwhelmed
- ✓ Disappointed
- ✓ Masking

- ✓ Afraid
- ✓ Sadness
- ✓ Disconnection
- ✓ Overwhelmed
- ✓ Seeking reward

- 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
- Early neglect may create need to control a situation or accumulate resources
- Afraid of pain, threats or being misunderstood
- Unwilling to appear vulnerable
- Wanting to hurt someone they do not trust

- ✓ Afraid
- ✓ Creating predictability
- ✓ Seeking belonging
- ✓ Seeking control
- ✓ Seeking connection

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

Preferable language

- ✓ Seeking closeness
- ✓ Seeking connection
- ✓ Anxious
- ✓ Afraid

What might be happening in the moment

- 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

What might be happening in the moment

- 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

Preferable language

- ✓ Fearful of change
- ✓ Afraid
- ✓ Overwhelmed
- ✓ Distressed

Negatively charged language

Attention Seeking

Ungrateful

Controlling

Narcissistic

Intimidating

Inappropriate humour

- ✓ Afraid
- ✓ Organised
- ✓ Seeking familiarity
- ✓ Seeking boundaries
- ✓ Seeking predictability

- 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

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

- ✓ Seeking nurture
- ✓ Afraid
- ✓ Competitive
- ✓ Seeking connection
- ✓ Inappropriate humour

- ✓ 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

- 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

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

Preferable language

- ✓ Overwhelmed
- ✓ Seeking soothing
- ✓ Seeking nurture
- ✓ Anxious
- ✓ Discomfort

What might be happening in the moment

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

What might be happening in the moment

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

Preferable language

- ✓ Distressed
- ✓ Seeking nurture
- ✓ Seeking connection
- ✓ Overwhelmed

Negatively charged language

Fidgeting or unsettled

Overreacts or exaggerates

- 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

- ✓ Overwhelmed
- ✓ Scared
- ✓ Stressed

- 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

Clingy

Forgetful or disorganised

- ✓ Seeking nurture
- ✓ Seeking connection
- ✓ Afraid of abandonment
- ✓ Overwhelmed

- ✓ Afraid
- ✓ Seeking nurture
- ✓ Seeking reassurance

- ✓ Overwhelmed
- ✓ Afraid
- ✓ Sensory overwhelm
- ✓ Seeking connection
- ✓ Hungry
- ✓ Overstimulated

- 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

Failure of routines

Baby talk

- 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