



## STRENGTH-BASED WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS

# WHY LANGUAGE MATTERS

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**This series focuses on the words or expressions considered “strength-based” to help or aimed at helping families, caseworkers and others involved in the child welfare system to strengthen how we describe the children and families impacted. This column suggests that programs, as well as practices, can benefit from a strength-based perspective. Here is a reframe on how we talk and write about commercial sexual exploitation of children.**

In the many decades before private, public and faith-based services for children were created, when thousands of orphaned and destitute children wandered the streets of New York City, children as young as 6 had to find ways to get food and money. Some sold newspapers and rags, others went on board the immigrant ships coming in from Europe to sing. Others were arrested and treated as adults for sexual acts labeled as prostitution. It was not until the past decade that some states — like California, for example — have recognized the harmful and unethical practices of arresting children for being sexually exploited by an adult and labeling them as child prostitutes.

California Sen. Holly Mitchell (D-Los Angeles) authored legislation with the tagline “There’s No Such Thing as a Child Prostitute,” advocating for the understanding of the complexity of trauma experienced by the commercial sexual exploitation of children

(CSEC). In 2015 the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act established federal requirements and protections relating to human trafficking. It expanded the definition of child abuse under the victims of child abuse act of 1990 to include human trafficking and the production of “child pornography” (old language). Now states must consider that children who are identified as victims of sex trafficking are actually victims of neglect, physical, and sexual abuse, and the trafficking portion of the definition can be expanded to people who are not yet 24 years of age.

The Associated Press stopped using the old language of prostitution in 2016, after a successful groundbreaking Change.org petition asked that the media change deficit language and stop labeling trafficking victims as child prostitutes. This effort continues with anti-human trafficking advocates seeking to help others understand the complexity of the abuses involved and eliminate the psychologically dam-

aging language used. The aim is to change the perceptions and reframe the questions from law enforcement, lawmakers and any service providers who interact with victims from “What did you do?” to “What happened? How can I help?”

Over the past decade, Saving Innocence, a community-based organization in Los Angeles, has been advocating for policies, programs and practices to serve the CSEC population. Saving Innocence has created a family foster care program that recruits, develops and supports foster parents. Staff and foster parents use trauma-informed practices and strength-based language to work with children and young people who have been traumatized by the exploitative behavior of adults who used them for financial and sexual gratification. Saving Innocence foster parents and agency staff:

1. Are aware that young people in foster care are at higher risk of being trafficked than the general population, especially those who are African American and Latinx, undocumented and identify as LGBTQIA.
2. Embrace the shift from “blaming and shaming” that occurs when viewing children and young people — both boys and girls — who historically were labeled as prostitutes and arrested for behaviors that now

are understood to include many layers of complex trauma and vulnerability. Foster parents and agency staff know that the role of a trusted adult is to protect and nurture children.

3. Understand that a child is not going to stand on a street corner and choose to be exploited. Children of those ages do not understand the meaning of trading sex or sexual images for anything of value. The average age of child sexual exploitation is 12, and a large number of trafficking survivors in the U.S. were at one time in foster care, according to the U.S. Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2019. It is estimated that 70-90% of children who were exploited have experienced some form of childhood sexual abuse.
4. Are committed to making lasting connections to adults who can support them to — as well as through — adulthood. Independent living and “aging out” cannot be service plan goals. We should not use language that we would not use to describe the birth children of foster parents or agency staff. Foster care can be deemed successful only when children leave the program connected with at least one adult who intends to provide a relationship that is safe, nurturing and intended to be enduring.
5. Use strength-based, person-first language that should be written and spoken when it comes to caring for, working with and advocating for these children and young people. See the above table for the words and expressions used at Saving Innocence.

Consider the perspectives of young people who have been trafficked.

Instead of this	Say this
AWOL (Absent Without Leave)	Elopement/Runaway
Case or Placement	Child/young person/name of person
Case Worker	Child Advocate
Child Prostitute	Child who experienced/was impacted by sexual exploitation/survivor/lived experience expert
CSEC Kid	Child impacted by exploitation
Child Pornography	Child abuse imagery/ Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM), Child Sexual Exploitation Material (CSEM)
Pimp/boyfriend/daddy/madam	Trafficker/Exploiter
Placement/group home	Foster Family/Care Facility
Recruited for trafficking	Groomed/Manipulated
Survival Sex	Sexual Exploitation
Trigger	Trauma reminder

When working with Saving Innocence, they often tell the story of being labeled as prostitutes and being told that exploitation is their fault. As many of them share, “We never knew we were victims being preyed on by adults.” Through advocacy, support, growth and healing, they acknowledge that they are survivors, leaders and lived-experience experts. They can educate policymakers, professionals and help other young people heal.

With an understanding of how changing the language can change perceptions and treatment, we can continue to advocate for strength-based language to be used as we are mindful to label jars, not people. •

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