Language Matters

Overview

The Mental Health Foundation (2020) points out that 'words are a barrier to help-seeking and a motivator for making discrimination acceptable'. Language influences the way in which people view the world. The meaning we attach to words and language can shape our feelings, attitudes and beliefs not only about ourselves, but the wider world.

This CPD is intended to support professionals in their use of accessible language when working with children, young people and families within multi-disciplinary contexts.

Target audience

Multi-disciplinary contexts

Duration

Approximately 1 hour

The Learning Institute provides opportunities for individuals and communities through high quality education, training and research programmes that challenge personal barriers and promote social inclusion. To find out more, please get in touch.

Introduction

The aim of the tasks within this CPD is to raise awareness for professionals in their choice of language when in supporting roles with children, young people and families.

The tasks here will specifically help you to meet the objectives below.

Objectives

- To recognise professional jargon when you see or hear it.
- To understand the impact of professional language and jargon on families, children and young people.
- To consider ideas for the use of alternative language in practice environments.
- To support personal reflection on the use of language with families, children and young people.

Resources

Pen and paper for note taking

Internet access to following:

- Think Local Act Personal (2020) *Why Language Matters in Social Care*. [Podcast] 30 January. Available at: https://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/Latest/Podcast-why-language-matters-in-social-care/ (Accessed: 18th April 2020).

Task 1: What is professional jargon?

Professional jargon consists of terms that are sometimes familiar, but often not, and may be profession specific. Jargon may include abstract words, non-existent words and acronyms and abbreviations.

Spend a few minutes making a list of jargon, acronyms and abbreviations that you have heard or use within your professional environment.

How accessible do you consider these to be for children, young people and families?

Task 2: Understanding the impact of professional language and jargon on families, children and young people

Consider a time when a professional has used language that you were unable to access either in a professional or personal context.

How did it make you feel?

Did you feel confident enough to question the professional about their use of language?

Thompson (2018, p.85), points out that the use of jargon and specialised language may be useful on occasion, but inappropriate use can reinforce the power differences between the professionals and those seeking help. This serves to alienate and isolate the very people professionals are seeking to support.

Listen to the podcast which can be found at:
https://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/_assets/audio/Why-language-matters-in-social-care.mp3

Makes notes on the following:

Which words have you heard professionals use that resonate with the key messages of the podcast?

Consider the words and jargon you might use as a professional.

How do you think you will try to rephrase or alter your language as a result of listening to the podcast? Write down your thoughts about this.

Task 3: To consider the use of alternative language in practice environments.

Rewrite the fictional case notes below, decoding the jargon and acronyms where possible.

> *B was a LAC herself due to CSA/CSE and DA, before she became a parent at 14. Her FC and LA felt the pregnancy made the placement untenable and placed her in residential care. The case was closed to the LA two years later. Later, she became known to MH services when she accessed the EIS and the LA held a TAF L1, which escalated to a L3 after a MASH meeting. V is now subject to a S.17 and the CIN process. FGC not offered. B is not cooperating with services as well as she could. The initial starting school home visit for V was cancelled and B did not attend her last OS appt.*

Consider how accessible you found the language.

- Would a parent, carer, child or young person, who under the Freedom of Information Act, may request access at a future point, be able to understand them?

- Is any of the language derogatory or depersonalising?

- Would you feel confident to challenge this language on behalf of a child, young person or family you are supporting?

The chronology in the case notes is discussing a person's life and this language is not uncommon. Often, there are no strengths identified, and the acronyms are challenging to decipher, even for professionals.

How to make your language more accessible, less isolating and meaningful

The table sets out specific consideration that could be made to ensure that your language is more accessible, less isolating and more meaningful. Consider each point in turn to identify your next steps. A **print version** of this table is available at the end of this document. Use it to note down your own next steps.

Action	My next steps
Consider the language you use when compiling notes or during meetings. Families, children and young people are often in vulnerable positions and may not understand the jargon being used.	*Eg produce a 'Glossary' of all jargon that can be used for me to identify which terms as not well known. Read this prior to meetings as a reminder to myself.*
Review terms that you use within your practice environment. These may be useful on occasion, but consider rephrasing terms that depersonalise such as 'service user' or 'client'.	
Consider language that apportions blame as this is unhelpful. Terms such as 'lack of parenting skills' could be rephrased as 'needs additional support with parenting'.	
Terms such as 'attention seeking' should be carefully considered. People who seek attention are often 'care seeking'.	
Be specific when discussing mental health concerns. Mental health issues covers a wide spectrum.	
Call family members by their names in meetings, particularly where families are present. Siblings are brothers and sisters.	
Try to avoid referring to children as LACs or a foster carer as an FC, consider using their names.	
Refer to where a child lives as their home when they are present, not a placement or unit.	
Create an environment of trust where families, children and young people can tell you if they don't understand. If someone needs assistance to understand, ensure that this happens. Use interpreters, visual aids, learning disability advocates or a person who is able to bridge the communication gap between you.	
Challenge professional language where appropriate. This can be done in a respectful manner.	
Ensure that children, young people and families understand their rights and your responsibility as a professional supporting them.	

Task 4: Reflection on learning

Note down your responses to the following questions:

- What knowledge did I already have that has been refreshed by this CPD?

- How has this CPD developed my knowledge and understanding?

- How can I apply what I now know to my practice?

- Consider how you can record your goals/targets so that you will make use of them when you are able to return to the classroom.

Sources

Think Local Act Personal (2020) *Why Language Matters in Social Care*. [Podcast] 30 January. Available at: https://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/Latest/Podcast-why-language-matters-in-social-care/ (Accessed: 18th April 2020).

Further reading

Mental Health Foundation (2020) *Why the language we use to describe mental health matters* Available at: https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/blog/why-language-we-use-describe-mental-health-matters

Thompson, N. (2018) *Promoting Equality: Working with Diversity and Difference.* 4th edn. London: Palgrave.

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Other CPD - www.learninginstitute.co.uk/cpd

Print version - How to make your language more accessible, less isolating and meaningful

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