Hillingdon Safeguarding Partnership

'Speaking With CARE Framework'

Promoting clarity, compassion, and accountability in safeguarding language

Introduction

Language plays a critical role in safeguarding practice, shaping both the perception of harm and the nature of the professional response. The 'Speaking with CARE Framework' has been developed to support practitioners across the Hillingdon Safeguarding Partnership in adopting clear, honest, and accountable language when working with both children and adults at risk. It promotes a conscious approach to communication, recognising how language can inadvertently minimise, obscure, or excuse abuse and neglect. By encouraging the use of terminology that is accurate, validating, and protective, the framework helps to strengthen professional practice and improve safeguarding outcomes.

Framework Overview: The CARE Principles

- ➢ **C – Challenge soft language**
- ➢ **A – Avoid victim blaming framing**
- ➢ **R – Reflect on tone and implication**
- ➢ **E – Empower with honesty**

C – Challenge soft language

Safeguarding practitioners must avoid vague or diluted terminology when describing risk, harm or abuse. Phrases such as "inappropriate relationship" or "concerning behaviour" may unintentionally minimise the severity of the situation. Instead, we must be specific and factual, naming the behaviour or risk clearly and accurately. For example, instead of referring to "an inappropriate incident", it is more protective to record "an adult male touched the child's thigh without consent during a one-to-one session". This clarity not only respects the experience of the individual but also ensures risk is fully understood and appropriately addressed.

A – Avoid victim blaming framing

Language should never shift responsibility onto the person who has experienced harm. Expressions like "he's struggling to cope", "it's a private matter within the family" or "her behaviour provokes him" can serve to excuse abusive behaviour or overlook the experience of the victim. As practitioners, it is our responsibility to focus on the impact on the child or adult at risk, rather than justifying or explaining away the actions of the person causing harm. Clear, non-judgmental language that centres the victim helps ensure appropriate responses and support.

R – Reflect on tone and implication

Practitioners are encouraged to reflect on the tone and underlying messages in their language. Ask: Am I minimising/distorting risk? Am I unintentionally justifying harmful behaviour? Words have the power to either mask or expose the seriousness of a situation. For instance, saying that "there was a family dispute" may fail to communicate the reality of ongoing domestic abuse. Accurate, neutral language that clearly describes behaviours and their impact can help ensure risk is recognised and acted upon.

E – Empower with honesty

Honest language, delivered with empathy and professionalism, supports both the victim and the multi-agency team in understanding and addressing harm. Use words that validate the lived experience of the child or adult and open the door to meaningful support. Phrases such as "the child appears frightened and disclosed that their stepfather has been hitting them" acknowledge both the behaviour and the emotional experience, making it easier for other practitioners to offer timely and appropriate interventions.

Application Across Adult and Children's Safeguarding

The CARE framework is designed to be universally applicable across both children's and adults' safeguarding. Regardless of age, individuals who experience harm deserve to be seen, heard, and responded to through language that is honest, specific, and non-blaming. The principles of CARE help ensure that practitioners describe risk and abuse in a way that does not minimise harm or excuse the actions of those responsible. This is applicable in all cases involving safeguarding and harm but may be particularly helpful with cases such as child sexual abuse, domestic violence, exploitation, or neglect of older adults. By adopting a shared language of clarity and compassion, we strengthen our collective ability to safeguard all individuals in need of protection.

This framework must be embraced and embedded across the entire multi-agency network. Practitioners from health, social care, police, education, housing, voluntary organisations and beyond each play a vital role in identifying and responding to harm. Inconsistent or vague language between agencies can lead to missed risks or delayed interventions. By using CARE as a common standard, we create a shared understanding of safeguarding concerns, improve the quality of referrals and discussions, and foster a more coordinated, accountable, and trauma informed approach across the partnership.

'The use of CARE framework is not just about better language; it's about better outcomes'.

Embedding CARE into Practice

The CARE framework is intended to serve as a consistent reference point for practitioners across all safeguarding agencies. It should inform daily practice, including the recording of case notes, contributions to multi-agency discussions, and the supervision of staff. All practitioners have a

responsibility to challenge vague or minimising language, seek clarity, and ensure that communication accurately reflects the nature and severity of risk. Supervisors and managers are encouraged to embed the framework within reflective practice, while fostering a culture in which practitioners are supported to question language that may obscure or diminish the experience of harm.

Conclusion

The language used in safeguarding practice directly influences the ability to recognise, assess, and respond to risk. The CARE framework supports a culture of clear, accountable, and compassionate communication, ensuring that safeguarding concerns are neither minimised nor obscured by vague or dismissive terminology. It promotes a consistent standard of practice that prioritises accuracy, transparency, and empathy.

When applied effectively, this approach enables practitioners to identify harm more clearly, respond more effectively, and ensure that children and adults at risk are acknowledged, understood, and supported. The careful use of language strengthens multi-agency collaboration, enhances professional curiosity, and contributes to better safeguarding outcomes across all settings.