

How does the language used in child welfare impact families?

Content of this document was developed with members of [Rise's](#) Parent Advocate community, including Felicia Alleyne, Jovanna Frieson, Teyora Graves-Ferrell, Teresa Marrero, Shakira Paige, Zoraida Ramirez, Jeanette Vega, and Elliot Williams, each of whom is a parent advocate and leader who has been impacted by the child welfare system. Co-developing this document was an opportunity for Casey Family Programs' staff to learn and think deeply about the process of co-design, and about the use of language in the development of new resources. Being in intentional conversation, developing meaningful relationships, and working closely together to create this short brief was a far more impactful and informative process than simply contracting with Rise to develop a document. True transformation of the current child welfare system requires centering the expertise of those most impacted, and exploring different strategies for authentic engagement and co-design in everything we do.

When thinking about the language used in child welfare and the harm it causes families, we realize that words do have power, especially when thinking about the impact those words have on practice. We must do better and use language that supports — rather than stigmatizes — families.

— JEANETTE VEGA,
RISE CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR LEADERSHIP AND POLICY



This document's purpose is to educate and bring awareness to the language used within child welfare and other settings. Casey Family Programs developed this resource in partnership with members of [Rise](#)'s Parent Advocate community, all of whom have been impacted personally by the child welfare system. It is designed for anyone who works with families and youth.

Language should heal, not harm

Language can be used in ways that harm or heal, and parents with lived expertise have shared that, all too often, they feel that language is used to scrutinize or denigrate them. Being explicit about the negative impact that words can have, even if the intent is not to cause harm, can help address resistance to changing existing words and phrases, as well as encourage a more thoughtful approach to language. Child welfare professionals must acknowledge that sometimes the intent behind the language may be different from the impact it has on children and families, and that ultimately, the words and phrases used in child welfare should reflect the values of respect for — and partnership with — families.

For example...

“At-risk” means: in a state or condition marked by a high level of risk (possibility of loss or injury) or susceptibility. Parents impacted by the child welfare system have shared the following about their experience of the term “at-risk”:

- Can be broadly used to justify requiring or recommending a particular intervention “in case” things happen because the parent lives in poverty.
- May be used by the child welfare system to escalate a situation.
- Often feels like an excuse or justification to remove children who are not in immediate danger.
- May not be based on facts but rather on imagining what *could* happen or what *may* be a safety concern sometime in the future.

Consider...

- Naming the concern or the risk rather than applying this term generally to a person or situation. Just saying “at-risk” may be too broad.

Jeanette's story

I was at a child safety conference as an advocate for another parent. Because the parent had a past case three years back, the phrase ‘at risk’ was used to make their (the agency’s) point sound really strong in the current case against her. Using this phrase is a way for them to hold the past against you. By saying that your child is ‘at risk’ currently because of past history gives the perception that the parent is automatically a repeat offender. They hold the power of determining when the ‘risk’ will go away, and as long as they use the phrase ‘at risk,’ a child will remain in foster care.

As the values of child welfare shift to engagement and support of children and families, rather than the historical approach of family surveillance and separation, the language that the system and its partners use also should change. Some commonly used words, such as “congregate care” or “group care,” can *conceal* the impact the system has on youth and families. Instead, adopting language that individuals who have experienced the system use, such as “institutional placement,” can *illuminate* and make transparent the real impacts of the system.

Words can lead to action, and the intent behind them can inform systems change. It is important to consider the impact and intent of language in order to create a shared path forward that empowers children, youth, and families. **It is less about exchanging one word for another and more about understanding why it is necessary to think about the words used. The child welfare system needs to ask what words are causing harm and what language would help heal the harm, and engage all partners in discussing why and how words and phrases may need to change.**

For example...

“Foster parent” means: a person who cares for a child who is not his or her biological child. Parents impacted by the child welfare system have shared the following about their experience of the term “foster parent”:

- “A foster caregiver is not my child’s parent, ever.”
- They feel as if they are no longer their child’s parent or are being replaced.
- Children may also be confused.

Consider...

- Using the term “caregiver” instead of “parent” to emphasize the care that we want all children to receive if they cannot be with their parents.

When a case planner addresses me by name, it’s respectful. But then when they write up their notes, they often refer to me as ‘the birth mom’ or just ‘BM,’ which is offensive. Those case notes make their way to courts where it continues to be normalized and perpetuated. I like to say ‘practice makes automatic.’ There needs to be a change in how we speak and that has to start at the top, until everyone is using respectful language.

— TERESA MARRERO,
RISE PARENT ADVOCATE COORDINATOR

LEARNING TOGETHER: How does the language used in child welfare impact families?

- Encouraging parents and foster caregivers to discuss what language the child could use when referring to the caregiver (and include the child in the conversation, if developmentally appropriate).
- Supporting the parent and foster caregiver to develop a relationship so that they can co-parent the child together.

My child’s foster caregiver said to call her ‘Mama Amy.’ But I’m their mama, no one else. So I said, ‘They can call you Godmom Amy, Ms. Amy, or something else — but not Mama Amy.’

— SHAKIRA PAIGE,
RISE PEER TRAINER

- 1 The document was also reviewed by members of the Knowledge Management Lived Experience Advisory Team in August 2021 and April 2022. This team includes youth, parents, kinship caregivers, and foster caregiver with lived expertise of the child welfare system who serve as strategic partners with Family Voices United, a collaboration between FosterClub, Generations United, the Children’s Trust Fund Alliance, and Casey Family Programs. Members who contributed include Sonya Begay, Crystal Garduno, Marquetta King, Robyn Robbins, and Ryan Young.



[Rise](#) was founded in 2005 and is led by parents impacted by the family policing system. Rise believes that parents have the answers for their families and community. Based in New York City, Rise creates safe spaces where impacted parents can reflect on their lives, connect with peers, learn about the family policing system’s history and policies, strengthen their writing, public speaking and advocacy skills, and mobilize their communities for justice. Rise and Casey Family Programs are partnering to better understand and elevate the perspectives of impacted parents through collaborative projects and co-developed products.

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