



**LANGUAGE
TO USE**

**LANGUAGE
TO AVOID**

**A Journalist's Guide
to Reporting on
Child Abuse & Neglect**

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Every time journalists publish news of abuse or neglect, they are sharing a story of someone's trauma.

News organizations play an important role in informing public safety, and it is important that journalists weigh what is truly necessary for informing community education and action, and what might be harmful or re-traumatizing for victims.

When reporting on this subject, whether as a single incident or as a community health and safety concern, the following guide is meant to assist journalists in reporting on child abuse and neglect responsibly and accurately, while minimizing harm to victims.

1 Avoid identifying the victim by proxy

Even if the victim is not named in the story, sharing details from reports or charging documents including their age, gender, school, relationship to the abuser, occupation of the abuser, location of the abuse and the abuser's full name can just as easily identify them. Consider what information is necessary and relevant to the public and in the interest of public safety, and what you can do to avoid or minimize harm to the victim.

USE THIS



- "Man arrested on charges of sexually abusing 8-year-old girl."
- "Man charged with multiple felonies for child sex abuse."
- "The abuser was known to the victim."

NOT THIS



- "Man arrested for sexually abusing 8-year-old neighbor."
- "Man charged with sex abuse for exposing himself to granddaughters."
- "Man told officers the girl lived next door and he babysat her often."

2 Avoid euphemisms or indirect terms when describing sexual abuse

Using vague or "soft" terms to describe abuse can diminish the seriousness of the act. Focus instead on using legal or medical terms.

USE THIS



- Touched, forced, grabbed, genitals, sodomy, raped, assaulted

NOT THIS



- Caressed, fondled, kissed, felatio, made out, private parts, went down on, performed, non-consensual sex

3 Avoid language that implies consent

The term “underage women” or “underage men” is an oxymoron that attributes maturity to a child victim. Similarly, the use of “child pornography” attributes an act of sexual abuse or exploitation of a child to that of a legal industry involving consenting adults. While many state laws still use this term in statute, try to avoid it.

Stay away from phrases like: engaged in sex, performed oral sex, had sex with, sexual activities, sexual interactions or sexual relationships. Even if a child describes their abuse as consensual, legally they cannot give consent. Research your state laws related to consent.

USE THIS



- “Man arrested on charges of sexually abusing 13-year-old boy.”
- “High school teacher booked on allegations of child sex abuse.”
- “Man was booked into jail and is being held on several charges related to the alleged sexual abuse of two minors, according to police reports.”
- Former lawmaker arrested for sexual exploitation of a minor”

NOT THIS



- “Man arrested for sexual relationship with 13-year-old boy.”
- “Teacher accused of having an affair with teen girl he met online.”
- “Man was booked into jail for having sex with a 13-year-old and sexually abusing another.”
- “Former lawmaker arrested in child porn investigation”

Consider This: A Pattern of Abuse is Not an Affair

Intentionally or unintentionally, using phrases like “sexual relationship” suggests that the actions by the alleged abuser were acceptable because of the implied consent of the victim. The abuse may have involved a power dynamic, which put the victim in a vulnerable position where they could be manipulated or exploited by the abuser.

It is possible the victim feels an emotional connection with their abuser not because they are in a consensual relationship, but because they have been groomed to accept the abuse as normal.

4 Avoid framing stories in a way that implies responsibility by the victim, or harms the credibility of the victim's account

Extensive details of a victim's clothes or appearance, a third-party's unsubstantiated comments or opinions on a victim's lifestyle or perceived age, an alleged abuser's high regard or trusted status in the community — these can contribute to victim blaming and the idea that the victim is responsible for the alleged abuser's behavior.

USE THIS



- Shared, said, told, reported
- According to police reports/victim statements
- The victim/youth/child/minor stated that

NOT THIS



- Confessed, admitted, disclosed
- Allegedly punched and kicked the alleged victim before allegedly dragging them outside

Consider This: To Allege or Not To Allege? That is the Alleged Question.

The definition of allege is to assert without proof or before proving. Even the meaning of the word, according to Merriam-Webster, fluctuates between positive and negative connotations. Depending on its use in news stories allege can imply doubt.

While applying the term to an alleged abuser because they are innocent until proven guilty makes sense ethically and legally, applying the same term to a victim may prompt belief that they are lying. Overusing the word in a story can also unfairly devalue information.

5 Avoid using words that criminalize child victims of sex trafficking

While some state laws may list prostitution as a form of human trafficking of a child, the word itself has negative connotations of consent and culpability. Also refrain from language that can romanticize the role of the abuser, or sanitize a crime that compounds mental, emotional, physical and sexual abuse of child victims.

USE THIS



- Child victim of human trafficking, sex trafficker
- Charged with rape of a child

NOT THIS



- Child prostitute, john, pimp
- Charged with paying for sex

6 Avoid passive voice when detailing actions by the abuser against the victim

It makes sense when crime stories use passive voice if the individual responsible for the action is unknown, or if used by the victim in a direct quote when describing what happened.

Passive voice becomes a problem when used unnecessarily in a way that may assign blame to the victim, and negate the role of the alleged abuser.

USE THIS



- "The victim reported to police that [Name] raped her."
- "The perpetrator assaulted her, according to police documents."
- "[Name] pulled the teen into a vehicle."

NOT THIS



- "The victim reported that she was raped by [Name]."
- "She was assaulted by the perpetrator, according to police documents."
- "The teen was pulled into a vehicle by [Name]."

7 Avoid using details of abuse for the sake of shock

When a child is the victim of a violent crime, it is paramount that the journalist weigh what information is necessary to inform the public and encourage community action, and what details will only serve to cause harm to the victim or their family.

Be careful not to frame a story as a single tragic event perpetrated by a monstrous parent, sibling, relative or other alleged abuser as this can deter larger community conversations related to social services or the prevention of future abuse. Studies have shown* that sensational, episodic stories of abuse can oversimplify and distract from the often complex socioeconomic problems that lead to abuse (poverty, unemployment, mental illness and drug abuse).

*Tiegreen, S. & Newman, E. (2008). "The Effect of News 'Frames.'" Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma. Retrieved from <http://dartcenter.org/content/effect-news-frames>

Consider This: Public record doesn't mean publish

Publicly available police charging documents often include a child victim's description of their abuse. Directly quoting a minor's account of their abuse is not trauma-informed, and can be unbelievably harmful.

Remember that you are pulling from a conversation between a child who likely has no concept of public records or privacy, who has experienced trauma, and what they are sharing with someone they perceive to be a figure of authority. Weigh what information is necessary to inform public safety and consider paraphrasing instead.

8 Empower the community to protect children

Provide information to educate the public on the prevalence of child abuse, how to report it, and what social services are available to assist families in preventing abuse before it starts. Include any relevant mandatory reporting law. Check your state site for information, or visit childwelfare.gov for a searchable database of state laws. Consider including the following:

- Any state mandatory reporting law. Go to your state government website, or search the Children’s Bureau database at childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/state/
- State hotline for reporting child abuse
- Crisis nurseries, parenting classes and support groups
- State domestic violence hotline and area shelter information
- Contact information for your Prevent Child Abuse America state chapter: preventchildabuse.org
- Contact information for your National Children’s Alliance state chapter: www.nationalchildrensalliance.org

Consider This: Not all data is equal

Federal agencies and national data systems (such as the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System or Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System) are often the easiest way to find state-level statistics and comparisons regarding child abuse and neglect. When exploring data it’s important to keep in mind how different state definitions of abuse and neglect may affect these comparisons.

More importantly, data at the state or local municipality level often will provide a clearer understanding of your community’s unique issues and needs, as well as what policies, education or community action will best support prevention.

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Resources for Journalists:

- National Children’s Alliance is the national association and accrediting body for Children’s Advocacy Centers. The nonprofit works to promote and support communities with comprehensive care through hundreds of centers nationwide for child abuse victims to provide better outcomes. www.nationalchildrensalliance.org.
- Child Welfare Information Gateway promotes the safety, permanency, and well being of children, youth, and families by connecting child welfare, adoption, and related professionals as well as the public to information, resources, and tools covering topics on child welfare, child abuse and neglect, out-of-home care, adoption and more. childwelfare.gov
- Society for Professional Journalists is a nonprofit, professional organization that includes broadcast, print and online journalists, journalism educators, and students interested in journalism as a career. The SPJ is dedicated to encouraging the free practice of journalism and stimulating high standard of ethical behavior. spj.org
- RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) is a nonprofit anti-sexual assault organization. RAINN operates the National Sexual Assault Hotline, as well as the Department of Defense Safe Helpline. Their site also includes a searchable database of consent laws, mandatory reporting laws, etc., by state. <https://www.rainn.org/news/how-does-your-state-define-consent>
- National Domestic Violence Hotline is a nonprofit organization providing confidential support and services 24/7 to victims of domestic violence. Resources and information on domestic violence, healthy relationships, abuse and more can be found at their site. thehotline.org

