



# Buzzwords: Moving to Behavioral Descriptors



## What Are Buzzwords and Why Do They Matter?

“Buzzwords” are popular words, phrases, or jargon frequently used to quickly communicate ideas in a particular field or in popular culture. Buzzwords often are harmless in meaning and impact. However, they can be misleading and damaging when used to describe individuals and families in child welfare settings. This publication looks at buzzwords in the context of words or phrases commonly used in child welfare reporting and documentation that can be subjective or carry negative connotations, and offers strategies to minimize their negative impact.

Buzzwords can begin as early as an intake call with a reporting party’s description of a suspected child abuse or neglect case or a caseworker’s interpretation of a reported incident, and can be repeated throughout the life of a case. Commonly used statements in child welfare reporting like “The child was filthy,” and “The parents were hostile,” can form negative characterizations that may lead to unintended biases and can create barriers to effective engagement if left unchecked. Because word choices can influence perceptions, frequently repeated negative buzzwords may affect how a caseworker views the child and family during the assessment and may directly impact decision-making. Buzzwords may also lead to labeling that can be difficult for families and individuals to overcome.

## Some Potential Consequences of Using Unchecked Buzzwords:

The use of negative, subjective buzzwords may have potential consequences, including:

- ▶ Incomplete information that may impact assessment and decision-making
- ▶ Assumptions that could lead to a limited understanding of child and family needs and barriers to effective engagement
- ▶ Case planning and services that might not match actual needs
- ▶ Creation of stigma or false perceptions that result in unnecessary investigation, removal, or delayed reunification
- ▶ Unsupported decisions that are not in the best interest of the child and can affect safety, permanency, and well-being

In addition to the potential consequences listed above, the use of buzzwords may lead to further stigmatization related to race, ethnicity, or marginalized populations in child welfare. Buzzwords associated with poverty, substance use disorder, mental illness, race, ethnicity, or gender can create labeling that leads to bias and disparities among certain populations. For example, research points to racial bias by caseworkers and reporters as one of four likely contributing factors in

disproportionality (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Understanding the potential bias effect of buzzwords used to describe groups or individuals can help child welfare agencies further understand potential factors related to disproportionality. Similarly, understanding the potential impact of buzzwords on engagement, as well as assessment and decision-making, can help child welfare agencies achieve improved outcomes around child welfare safety, permanency, and well-being.

### A Success Story:

As a part of the 2010 California Disproportionality Project Breakthrough Series, the Alameda County Department of Children and Family Services implemented and tested a project to eliminate unintended biases connected to disproportionality of child welfare investigations involving children of color. The project, Hot Words (Asking Questions and Using Language that Does Not Result in Bias), found that the effect of “hot words” was profound as they moved from intake to the investigation narrative, court reports, and beyond. By raising awareness of “hot words,” intake workers were more successful in obtaining context that led to a clearer understanding of allegations and a reduction in referrals assigned to be investigated (Alameda County Social Services Agency, 2010).

## Strategies to Interrupt the Use of Buzzwords in Case Documentation:

Translating negative, subjective buzzwords into more descriptive language—objective language that describes the circumstances based on seen or heard facts and observations (see below for examples)—can have an immediate impact on assessment and decision-making and lead to better outcomes. It can also result in obtaining additional information about a family’s circumstances that can help support assessment, decision-making, and individualized service delivery. The following strategies are designed to help child welfare workers and agencies increase awareness about the use and impact of buzzwords and take personal responsibility for initiating changes that can eliminate their negative impact.

- ▶ **Learn to recognize buzzwords.** Review the list below to help identify some of the most common buzzwords found in child welfare documentation. Consider creating a chart of commonly used buzzwords in your county or region to share with program managers and staff.
- ▶ **Know where buzzwords are commonly found:**
  - Intake/screening reports taken from child protective services (CPS) hotlines
  - Investigation reports and related documentation if intake reports are substantiated
  - Court reports related to child welfare investigations or juvenile delinquency cases
  - Case management documentation, such as mental and behavioral health assessments, progress reports, permanency plans, reports on wraparound services, and more
- ▶ **Be self-aware and take personal responsibility.** Be aware of the potential effect of repeating buzzwords in writing and verbally. When you see or hear a buzzword, ask

whether it could create unintended bias. Ask what the worker or reporting party means by the statement, or what evidence they have in order to provide context and clarification:

- Examples: “When you say he was unkempt, what does that look like?” and “Can you give me an example of when he acted hostile?”
- Engage families and children with open, respectful communication during assessment. Use age-appropriate language to communicate and understand responses. Ask clarifying questions to better understand labels and buzzwords used by the family or individual, and avoid repeating those labels in verbal and written documentation.
- **Recognize and translate buzzwords into more objective, behavior-based descriptions.** Objective, behavior-based language includes facts based on what is seen, heard, and observed. See Exhibit 1 for examples.

*Exhibit 1*

- Example 1:
  - Subjective statement: “Mr. Smith was hostile and resisted removing Bobby from the home.”
  - Intervening question: “What did Mr. Smith do to create that impression?”
  - Objective description: “Mr. Smith responded with a loud, frustrated tone when the case manager raised the possibility of removing Bobby from the home to stay with his aunt.”
  - Document: When mentioning the possibility of removing Bobby from the home to stay with his aunt, Mr. Smith responded with a loud, frustrated tone.
- Example 2:
  - Subjective statement: “The counselor said Bobby always comes to school filthy.”
  - Intervening questions: “What does he look like?” and “How often did that happen?”
  - Objective description: “The counselor said Bobby came to school wearing the same clothing several days in a row and wore an oversized, torn, and dirty jacket.”
  - Document: The school counselor reported Bobby wore the same clothing with an oversized, torn, dirty jacket several days in a row.
- Example 3:
  - Subjective statement: “A neighbor says Ms. Smith is crazy and unstable.”
  - Intervening question: “Did the neighbor give examples of what makes Ms. Smith appear crazy?”
  - Objective description: “The neighbor says Ms. Smith rarely smiles, and he has seen her break down crying and come outside wearing pajamas to yell at her children.”
  - Document: The neighbor observed Ms. Smith crying and yelling at her children outside.

- ▶ **Write descriptive case notes and assessments.** Record facts, specific behaviors, and concrete observations in case notes and assessments. Use nouns and verbs to describe behavior, and avoid subjective language by limiting the use of value-based adjectives (e.g., “hostile” or “uncooperative”) (National Resource Center for In-Home Services, 2015). See Exhibit 1 for examples of ways to translate negative buzzwords into more descriptive, factual observation.
- ▶ **Train and engage partners.** Hold meetings or trainings with staff, community partners, Tribal partners, and other relevant parties to discuss the use and effect of buzzwords and the importance of interventions.
- ▶ **Review buzzwords in past case files and use them as teaching tools.** Train staff on how language can affect assessments and decisions, understanding of individualized needs, and access to appropriate services. Training should also emphasize the long-term impact of labeling.

## Commonly Used Buzzwords in Child Welfare

Exhibit 2 presents a list of buzzwords and phrases commonly found in initial hotline intake/screening and case documentation that are sometimes used in a subjective manner.

*Exhibit 2*

<b>Abusive</b>	<b>Filthy/dirty</b>	<b>Prostitution history</b>
<b>Addict</b>	<b>Frequent flier (runaway)</b>	<b>Resistant</b>
<b>Afraid</b>	<b>Hot-headed</b>	<b>Scared</b>
<b>Aggressive</b>	<b>Hostile</b>	<b>Sexually exploited</b>
<b>Alcoholic</b>	<b>Hysterical</b>	<b>Substance abuse history</b>
<b>Angry</b>	<b>Incorrigible</b>	<b>Terrified</b>
<b>Assaultive</b>	<b>Isolated</b>	<b>Threatening</b>
<b>Belligerent</b>	<b>Limited</b>	<b>Traffic in home</b>
<b>CPS history</b>	<b>Loud</b>	<b>Trouble maker</b>
<b>Crazy</b>	<b>Marginal (financial)</b>	<b>Unattended</b>
<b>Criminal history</b>	<b>Mental health history</b>	<b>Uncooperative</b>
<b>Defiant</b>	<b>Nasty</b>	<b>Uneducated</b>
<b>Destructive</b>	<b>Neglect</b>	<b>Unfit parent</b>
<b>Disruptive delinquent</b>	<b>No resources</b>	<b>Unkempt</b>
<b>Drug user</b>	<b>Noncompliant</b>	<b>Unstable</b>
<b>Dysfunctional</b>	<b>Nonresponsive</b>	<b>Unsupervised</b>
<b>Emotionally disturbed</b>	<b>Not engaged</b>	<b>Violent</b>
<b>Explosive</b>	<b>Out of control</b>	<b>Volatile</b>
<b>Failure to rehabilitate</b>	<b>People in and out of home</b>	<b>Weird</b>
<b>Father is absent</b>	<b>Promiscuous</b>	<b>Whooping and whipping</b>

\* The buzzwords in Exhibit 2 have been adapted from the Alameda County "Hot Words (Asking Questions and Using Language that Does Not Result in Bias)" project in conjunction with feedback from various stakeholder groups.

\* Please note that some of the words listed above could be used to objectively describe an incident or situation. It is important to avoid using these, and similar terms, in a subjective manner without providing further context.

## Key Reminders

- ▶ Increase awareness: Buzzwords begin as early as intake/screening; therefore, it's important to "unpack" buzzwords from the initial hotline call.
- ▶ Avoid subjective interpretations of buzzwords. How you define certain buzzwords is often different than what is meant and how others define the same buzzwords.
- ▶ Take personal responsibility: Remember, we all have used buzzwords as quick descriptors. You can stop the continuation of negative, subjective buzzwords in written documentation and verbal communications when you see or hear them by asking follow-up questions to describe related behaviors, actions, or observations.
- ▶ Provide objective descriptions: Take the sting out of buzzwords by making sure your case notes, court reports, case consultants, and all communications are free from subjective buzzwords.

## References:

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