

A Quick Reference Guide for Professionals on Appropriate Language when Identifying and Responding to Domestic Abuse

We know the key to effective practice and good outcomes for families relies on trusted relationships based on an in depth understanding of the nature of domestic abuse. Language matters, as it can alienate victims / non-abusive parents; and unintentionally collude with perpetrators.

1. What ‘Space for Action’ does the victim have? Consider:

- The presence of coercion and the lack of choice and control that survivors and children endure in abusive situations.
- The repetitive and enduring impact of abusive controlling tactics, emotionally and physically.
- The shame and guilt many victims carry; messages already embedded by perpetrators.
- The fear of being blamed by professionals and how this strengthens the control of the perpetrator.
- The person at the greatest risk of short, medium, and longer-term harm – the current and historical ‘pattern’ of behaviour that erodes confidence, self-esteem and impacts on decision making.

2. Framing questions – avoiding inference of blame:

Destructive statements – victim blaming	Constructive language and practice – supporting survivors
“Why don’t you leave?”	“What do you think would happen if you tried to leave?”
“Why did you let him back in the house?”	“What would the consequences have been if you hadn’t answered the door?”
“Why are you answering his texts / calls?”	“What happens if you don’t respond to his texts or calls?”
“Why didn’t you call the police?”	“What happened last time you called the police that made you feel it wasn’t a safe option to call them again?”

3. Threatening statements escalate risk:

Statement - *“You need to leave, or you’re at risk of losing your children”* – We know leaving increases the risk of homicide and needs planning carefully – by using this type of language, you may have just increased the risk and destroyed any trust. Your client is likely to disengage and stop reporting incidents to you and others.

4. Describing and recording the abuse

If our language and conversations are framed **within the context of the perpetrator’s patterns of abuse**, then it will help us to understand:

- **The context** in which survivors are making decisions
- **The impact** of the abuse (and the associated trauma) on their decision-making
- **The reasons** why survivors and children respond the way they do
- **The restrictions and control** that a survivors and children are kept under
- **The need to avoid using victim-blaming or destructive language**
- **The need to acknowledge the strengths and protective factors** that survivors display in the face of living with violence and abuse

Example: *“X has failed to comply with the greed plan”* – Change the language to *“X has been unable to comply with the agreed plan due to...”* and explain the barriers through the Space for Action model (main document).

Think - What would ‘X’ ‘need’ that would help to increase safety and take some forward steps with you? What is important ‘to’ ‘X’ at this point, rather than what is important ‘for’ ‘X’? Understanding and meeting immediate needs gets a foot on the ladder to progression.

Remember: We can only ‘move’ if there is space to do so...

Space for Action

The ten domains or areas of a survivors life where her space for action can be narrowed as a result of coercive control



“Simply living in the body of an oppressed person is traumatic and exhausting”
(Women Making Waves Volume 18, Issue 3, 2007)

Support to increase her **“space for action”**

What freedoms and restrictions does she have?

Diagram adapted by Women’s Aid with permission from Liz Kelly, 2014