

Victim blaming language (VBL) in child exploitation cases

Two bitesize videos were created to raise awareness of Victim Blaming Language (VBL) in child exploitation cases.

First published

10 September 2025

Key details

Does it work?	Untested – new or innovative
Focus	Organisational
Topic	Child sexual exploitation and abuse Vulnerability and safeguarding
Organisation	North Yorkshire Police
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Region	North East
Partners	Police Local authority
Stage of practice	The practice is implemented.
Start date	December 2024
Scale of initiative	Local

Key details

Target group	Children and young people Workforce
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Aim

The aims are to:

- address the impact of the workforce using VBL on children and young people
- ensure the workforce are aware of their use of language directly with the person or indirectly through reports such as call logs, occurrence logs and safeguarding referrals
- show a child's perspective on speaking with a police officer for the first time and what barriers may be present for the child
- upskill frontline officers to use appropriate language
- record all actions and decisions without using VBL

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes are to:

- improve officers and staff awareness of VBL in relation to child sexual exploitation
- improve officers and staff knowledge on what VBL has been used and observed within the force
- raise awareness on how VBL can cause upset and mistrust to a child or victim

Description

A recent audit of missing child and child protection cases revealed that some officers and staff were using victim-blaming language (VBL) in their updates or referrals to other agencies. This finding led to an action point focused on raising awareness of VBL within North Yorkshire Police.

To begin, the force conducted internal and Google searches to identify existing materials on VBL awareness. These searches found no resources specific to policing or tailored to the force's needs. As a result, the Child Protection Inspection Coordinator initiated the creation of in-house educational videos to inform the workforce.

The focus was placed on the use of VBL in child missing and exploitation cases. North Yorkshire Police consulted with the youth commission to better understand how to engage with children and gain insight into their thought processes. The force chose to feature children living in North Yorkshire to explain what VBL is and how alternative language can be used. The coordinator also reviewed examples of VBL from The children's society guidance.

VBL awareness videos

North Yorkshire Police produced two short, animated videos to raise awareness about VBL in child missing and exploitation cases:

Video one (five minutes)

- begins with an introduction and a summary from the Child Protection Inspection Coordinator explaining the rationale behind addressing VBL
- features children and young people from the Youth Commission discussing their experiences with VBL and police interactions

Video two (two minutes)

- focuses on potential barriers officers may face when engaging with children and young people
- explains how the force can adapt its approach to better understand a child's response to police engagement

Both videos are available to officers and staff via the force's bitesize learning site. They were created internally at no cost by the Learning and Development Team.

Originally, the force considered a "talking heads" format, but to protect the identity of the children involved, avatars were used instead. This also aided in subtitling speech when audio was unclear. To enhance audio quality, Adobe Audition was used, and officer voiceovers were created in Clipchamp. Child characters were designed using Adobe Illustrator and Adobe Puppet Maker, then animated with Adobe Character Animator. Camtasia was used to compile the videos with text prompts and background graphics.

Video launch and distribution

The corporate communications team launched both videos to all officers and staff, excluding the central orders team. The videos were distributed across all three command areas, with instructions to view them during shift briefings and complete the mandatory feedback form.

Specialist teams such as firearms and roads policing also received the videos. The wider force was notified via the Source Carousel, where the videos were featured for two weeks, along with reminders on the Viva Engage platform. They were also promoted in the weekly bulletin under the “Did You Know” section.

Overall impact

Mandatory feedback was collated at the conclusion of both videos. This involved the officer completing an online returns form to say which team they were in and whether they watched as a team or as individuals, to ensure the number of views were collated. The form also asks the workforce to grade the video from a rating of one (poor) to five (excellent) and add any comments or observations.

Feedback was mixed across the force with some officers liking the short videos and how the content was displayed and printing the guidance, with others not keen on the animation. Feedback also focused on putting examples into context, these were provided on a two-page information sheet and added to the video library as additional guidance. This was also included in the force's weekly bulletin.

One area of feedback around the delivery showed this would have been better received by some if it was a two-way session where questions could be asked and conversations around the examples to aid understanding. North Yorkshire Police have taken this on board and the force's next VBL input on Operation Soteria will predominantly be face to face with examples.

The overall impact is not yet known but the force's safeguarding assurance team (SAT) will monitor the use of VBL through all audits which include those on child protection, missing/exploited children, and investigations. When VBL is identified, the SAT record, address, and log these instances to support any further required actions, such as additional training.

Learning

- not all officers will be captured within the briefing sessions, therefore, the material has been made easily accessible for those who have missed it
- the force may need to include more examples of VBL to ensure the workforce have fully understood the impact of VBL. The Operation Soteria implementation team will also be covering this area in relation to RASSO cases
- it is essential to receive endorsement from the chief officer team, to ensure the workforce watch the videos and are aware of VBL
- when designing or delivering training-use local examples as this will receive more buy in from officers and staff
- promoting the videos in the weekly bulletin over a four-week period ensured further coverage to all officers and staff

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