

The terms and considerations below are offered as examples of language that may have a negative impact or cause harm for parents. This list is not meant to be exhaustive or prescriptive; rather, it is designed to help all stakeholders better understand the importance of language, and the impact that different words and phrases can have. It is designed to: encourage discussion and exploration of some terms frequently used in child welfare; support greater understanding of how those words or phrases may affect individuals directly impacted by the system; and advance considerations of the ways in which the current terminology could change to ensure all youth and families feel respected, valued, and supported.

The table is comprised of four columns:

- The first column contains the currently-used term itself
- The second contains a definition of the term adapted from an [online dictionary](#)
- The third column contains responses from individuals with lived experience of the child welfare system regarding the feelings and thoughts evoked by the term,<sup>1</sup> and their concern with how the term is currently used
- The fourth column contains considerations for how language could shift to be more thoughtful and accurate.

Word/Term	Definition	How Parents Impacted by the Child Welfare System May Experience the Term	Considerations for More Thoughtful Language
Abusive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using harsh and insulting language, physical violence, or emotional cruelty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As a descriptive term, can imply that someone is a bad parent, monster, untrustworthy, dangerous, or permanently damaged</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be specific about the type of abuse that occurred, i.e., physical abuse, sexual abuse, etc.</li> <li>• Name the behavior or the action, rather than using the term to label or describe a parent</li> </ul>
<b>At-risk</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In a state or condition marked by a high level of risk (possibility of loss or injury) or susceptibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be broadly used to justify intervention “in case” things happen because parents live in poverty</li> <li>• May be used by the child welfare system to escalate the situation</li> <li>• Often feels like an excuse or justification to remove children who are not in immediate danger</li> <li>• May not be based on facts, but rather on imagining what could happen that <i>may</i> be a safety concern</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Name the concern or the safety risk rather than applying this term generally to a person or situation; just saying “at-risk” is too broad</li> <li>• Parent who physically abused their child</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> The third and fourth columns reflect feedback from parents impacted by the child welfare system and reviewed by other individuals with lived experience with the child welfare system, including youth previously in out-of-home care, relative caregivers, and foster caregivers.

Word/Term	Definition	How Parents Impacted by the Child Welfare System May Experience the Term	Considerations for More Thoughtful Language
		some time in the future	
Birth parent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The natural father or mother of a child who is in the child welfare system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Devalues and diminishes the position/role of the parent</li> <li>Implies that only biological parents are investigated</li> <li>Predicts outcomes, i.e.adoption.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Address individuals by their name</li> <li>In venues/meetings where all caregivers are present and it may be necessary to identify each individual by their role, consider use of “parent” and “foster caregiver”</li> </ul>
Child Welfare System, Child Protection System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social work centered upon the welfare and safety of children (as upon improvement in health and home conditions)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prioritizes children as the clients, rather than families - but families are a unit and support should be all-inclusive</li> <li>Implies that children need protection from their families, and may demonize parents</li> <li>“Family Regulation System” or “Family Policing System” may more accurately reflect how the current system is experienced by families</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider framing that reflects what families and other stakeholders hope the system could be (e.g., Child &amp; Family Well-Being System, Family Support System, or Family Support Network, etc.)</li> </ul>
<b>Chronic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continuing or occurring again and again for a long time</li> <li>Suffering from a chronic disease</li> <li>Always present or encountered</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Suggests something that is persistent, unending, or recurrent</li> <li>Implies that a parent might not overcome a current crisis, and may never reunify with their children, which can make parents feel like their situation is hopeless or unsolvable</li> <li>Can make individuals feel pathologized</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider using this term only in relation to medical issues, i.e., chronic illness</li> </ul>

Word/Term	Definition	How Parents Impacted by the Child Welfare System May Experience the Term	Considerations for More Thoughtful Language
Congregate care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Group facilities designed especially for persons requiring supportive services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May not be a setting where youth experience “care”<sup>2</sup></li> <li>Has stigma attached</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>State the specific type of placement, i.e., “residential facility,” “congregate facility,” “institution,” or “group placement”</li> </ul>
Foster parent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A person who cares for a child who is not his or her biological child</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“A foster caregiver is not my child’s parent, ever”</li> <li>May make parents feel as if they are no longer their child’s parent or are being replaced</li> <li>Can also be confusing to children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider using the term “caregiver” instead of “parent”, i.e., “foster/resource caregiver” or “temporary caregiver”</li> </ul>
<b>Maltreatment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To treat cruelly or roughly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feels like “lazy language” to encompass a broad description of any possible harm towards a child</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Be specific about the maltreatment that took place</li> </ul>
<b>Neglect</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To give little attention or respect to</li> <li>To leave undone or unattended to especially through carelessness</li> <li>The state of being unattended or cared for</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May be experienced as shaming and blaming</li> <li>Neglect is often confused with conditions of poverty: the term is often misused to judge or measure conditions that are based on middle class values, and to judge families that live in conditions created by society.</li> <li>Neglect shouldn’t be about a lack of resources, but a lack of action, i.e., if a person is actively withholding care.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider language that separates poverty from neglect.</li> <li>Be specific in describing what neglect is., i.e., lack of what? Being specific will help get parents connected to the services they actually need.</li> </ul>

<sup>2</sup> In 2021, Rise published [An Unavoidable System](#), a study that shares the experiences of parents with lived child welfare experiences, experiences that generally would not be described as “care” or “caring.”