

Addressing the Impact of Language, Biases, and Labels on Youth




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This is us ...



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Activity



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Why This Matters

- Words are not neutral




- Language shapes identity and self-perception
- Labels influence behavior and engagement
- Create stigma
- Biases affect decisions and interventions
- Risk: reinforcing vulnerability instead of reducing it

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTn6qRohJNQ>

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The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy



- Labels → Identity → Behavior
 - Problematic → Hopelessness
 - Risky → Exclusion
 - Offender → Fixed Identity
- Youth internalize how they are described
- Can reinforce risk, shame, and isolation

Boldrini et al., 2024; Lambe et al., 2025

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Biases in Practice




- Implicit and explicit biases influence practice
- Affects assessment, expectations, interventions
- Bias can override curiosity

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Activity

What biases do you have?
Do you regularly reflect over having biases and how they affect you?
How do you keep them in check?
Is this something you talk to someone about?



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Behavior as Communication

- Problematic behavior reflects unmet needs
- Trauma, dysregulation, developmental gaps
- Context matters

(Simons et al., 2013)

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What's behind the behavior?



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Trauma Symptoms

Thoughts	Emotions	Body	Behaviors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rumination • Flashbacks • Concentration difficulties • Fear of being retraumatized • Difficulties sleeping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety and fear • Tense, irritated and angry • Depressed • Shame, guilt, bitterness • Sense of isolation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid heartbeat • Pressure on chest • Tense muscles • Tiredness, feeling of no energy • Body aches • Hypersvigilence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoidance • Difficulty relaxing • Avoiding being alone • Drug/alcohol use • Mood swings • Rituals

Grady et al., 2023; Yoder et al., 2025

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Biological and Contextual Vulnerabilities

Difficulties for Caregivers:

- Mental health issues, psychiatric and neuropsychiatric diagnoses
- Capacity for caregiving, social network
- Cultural differences between the family, child, and society
- Substance abuse, violence, aggression problems

Vulnerabilities of the Child:

- Trauma
- Mental health issues, psychiatric and neuropsychiatric diagnoses
- Deficiencies in emotional regulation and relational skills
- Attention problems, concentration difficulties, learning difficulties

Trew & Russel, 2024; Vines et al., 2025

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NEEDS AND VULNERABILITIES AWARENESS

BASIC NEEDS	TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF	HIGHER LEVEL CARE	RELATIONSHIPS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eat • Drink • Sleep Hygiene • Connection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exercise • Hygiene • Medications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recreation • Self-Care • Self-Value • Diagnosis Awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Touch • Connection/Attachment • Communication • Feeling Valued

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Trauma and the Brain

The brain develops from bottom to top, back to front, left to right

How Trauma Impacts Brain Development:

- Reduced integration of hemispheres'
- Thinner Corpus Callosum
- Info recall/storage, generalization
- Increased stress response
- Right hemisphere driving the train
 - Rhyme, rhythm, movement

TRAUMA BRAIN PROCESSING

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Needs and Vulnerabilities

- Understand emotional, relational, and contextual needs
- Identify skill deficits and trauma history
- Without this, interventions miss the target

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Shift Focus - from problem behaviors to needs and skills

- Understand and describe the problem behaviors
- Replace deficit language with strength-based language
- Language can open or close possibilities
- Understand and describe the needs those problem behaviors meet
- Vulnerabilities, Developmental level, Diagnosis, Trauma
- Comfortable being Uncomfortable
- Skills deficits and strengths

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So - Shift the Lens in Practice





From: What is wrong?
Start asking:

- What need is this behavior meeting?
- What skill is missing?
- What vulnerability is being expressed?
- How can I respond in a way that builds capacity?

Focus on vulnerabilities, needs, skills, and context

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WORK WITH SYMPTOMS TO REACH THE BEHAVIOR CHANGE

 WHAT DO WE SEE	 TRAUMA	 SOCIAL BATTERY NEUROPSYCHIATRIC DISORDER	 AGE TYPICAL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoidance • Restlessness • Impulsivity • Anxiousness • Aggressiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concentration • Hypervigilance • Control • Depression • Irritable/tense 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concentration • Restlessness • Difficulty with changes • Difficulty understanding • Irritable, Angry, scared 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depending on age • Anxiousness • Irritable • Overly assertive • Social anxiety

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Increasing Buy-In

- Understanding → Validation → Engagement → Change
- Youth engage when they feel understood
- Me problem versus you problems
- Psychoeducation
- Working with and against barriers
- Formal and informal
- Managing expectations
- 24/7 perspective



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The Importance of Empowerment

- Empowered people:
 - Are more resilient
 - Are more collaborative
 - Are better problem solvers
 - Are more confident
 - Have better academic achievement
 - Have a sense of agency
 - Feel worthy

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How do we Empower

- Choices
- Allow for self-advocacy
- Allow for risk taking and making mistakes
- Teach body safety
- Sharing feelings

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Wizard Skills: Putting the Pieces Together

- Strengths focused
- Concrete/Practical
- Hemispheric Integration/brain rewire
- Confidence and Competence
- Choice
- Problem solving/flexible thinking
- Safe Failure
- Adapted DBT Skills
 - Relationship Skills
 - Emotional Regulation
 - Mindfulness



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So, what do we do?
We get curious!



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Key Takeaways

- Language shapes identity
- Labels can harm or help
- Behaviour reflects needs
- Validation and empowerment drive change

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Empowerment through Understanding

- The Impact of Language, Biases and Labels on Vulnerable Youth



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