

# Buzzwords: Moving to Behavioral Descriptors<sup>15</sup>

**Buzzwords:** words, phrases, or jargon frequently used to quickly communicate ideas. Buzzwords may be harmless in meaning and impact. However, they can be misleading and damaging when used to describe individuals and families in child welfare settings.

Buzzwords can begin as early as a reporting party's description of suspected child maltreatment or a caseworker's interpretation of an incident, and can be repeated throughout the life of a case. Common statements like, "The child was filthy," and "The parents were hostile," can form negative characterizations that may lead to unintended biases and barriers to effective engagement if left unchecked. Word choices can influence perceptions, and repeated negative buzzwords may affect how a caseworker views the child and family and may directly impact decision-making. Buzzwords may also lead to labeling that can be difficult for families and individuals to overcome.

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

- Incomplete information that may impact decision-making
- Assumptions that could limit understanding of child and family needs and create barriers to effective engagement
- Case planning and services that might not match actual needs
- Creation of 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

Additionally, 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. Understanding the potential bias effect of buzzwords used to describe groups or individuals can help us further understand potential factors related to disproportionality. Similarly, understanding the potential impact of buzzwords on engagement, assessment, and decision-making can help achieve improved outcomes around child welfare safety, permanency, and wellbeing.

## Commonly Used Buzzwords in Child Welfare:

Volatile	Inappropriate	Weird	In the wind	Whooping
Filthy	Hostile	Frequent flier	Hysterical	Hot-headed
Angry	Crazy	Assaultive	Defiant	Belligerent
Destructive	Dirty	Delinquent	Drug User	Disruptive
Uneducated	Unstable	Unfit parent	Violent	Unkempt
Dysfunctional	Unmarried	Emotionally Disturbed	Absent father	Explosive
Abusive	Aggressive	Addict	Alcoholic	Afraid
Terrified	Trouble maker	Threatening	Uncooperative	Traffic in home
Dirty	Loud	Isolated	Minimal	Limited
Nonresponsive	Resistant	Not engaged	Scared	Promiscuous
Manipulative	Rude	Nasty	Noncompliant	Neglect

Translating subjective buzzwords into objective language - language that describes the circumstances based on seen or heard facts and observations - can have an immediate impact on 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.

**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 questions:* "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.

**Adapted from:** Capacity Building Center for States. (2021). Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/resources/buzzwords-moving-to-behavioral-descriptors-tip-sheet>