



A Journalist's Guide to Reporting on Child Abuse

The perception and conversation surrounding victimization of children is often framed through media coverage of high-profile cases of abuse and neglect. When reporting on this subject, whether as a single incident or as a community health and safety concern, the following guide is meant to assist journalists in reporting on child abuse responsibly and accurately, while minimizing harm to victims.

1 Avoid identifying the victim by proxy

Even if the victim is not named in the story, sharing details from reports or charging documents including their age, gender, school, relationship to the perpetrator, occupation of the perpetrator, location of the abuse and the perpetrator's full name can just as easily identify them. Consider what information is necessary and relevant to the public and in the interest of public safety, and what you can do to avoid or minimize harm to the victim.

USE THIS



- » "Man arrested on charges of sexually abusing 8-year-old girl."
- » "Man charged with multiple felonies for child sex abuse."
- » "The perpetrator was known to the victim."

NOT THIS



- » "Man arrested for sexually abusing 8-year-old neighbor."
- » "Man charged with sex abuse for exposing himself to granddaughters."
- » "Man told officers the girl lived next door and he babysat her often."

2 Avoid euphemisms or indirect terms when describing sexual abuse

Using vague or “soft” terms to describe abuse can diminish the seriousness of the act. Focus instead on using legal or medical terms, unless the wording is taken from a direct quote vital to the story.

USE THIS



- » Touched, forced, grabbed, genitals, sodomy, raped, assaulted

NOT THIS



- » Caressed, fondled, kissed, felatio, made out, private parts, went down on, performed, non-consensual sex

3 Avoid language that implies consent

The term “underage women” or “underage men” is an oxymoron that attributes maturity to a child victim. Stay away from phrases like: engaged in sex, performed oral sex, had sex with, sexual activities, sexual interactions or sexual relationships. Even if a child describes their abuse as consensual, legally they cannot give consent. Research your state laws related to consent. You can also learn more about consent laws in the United States at the Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (RAINN) website. <https://www.rainn.org/news/how-does-your-state-define-consent>

USE THIS



- » “Man arrested on charges of sexually abusing 13-year-old boy.”
- » “High school teacher booked on allegations of child sex abuse.”
- » “Man was booked into jail and is being held on several charges related to the alleged sexual abuse of two minors, according to police reports.”
- » “Man accused of buying alcohol for underage girls”

NOT THIS



- » “Man arrested for sexual relationship with 13-year-old boy.”
- » “Teacher accused of having an affair with teen girl he met online.”
- » “Man was booked into jail for having sex with a 13-year-old and sexually abusing another.”
- » “Man accused of buying alcohol for underage women”

Further considerations: A Pattern of Abuse is Not an Affair

Intentionally or unintentionally, using phrases like “sexual relationship” suggests that the actions by the alleged perpetrator were acceptable because of the implied consent of the victim. The abuse may have involved a power dynamic, which put the victim in a vulnerable position where they could be manipulated or exploited by the abuser. It is possible the victim feels an emotional connection with their abuser not because they are in a consensual relationship, but because they have been groomed to accept the abuse as normal.

4 Avoid sentences that describe the abuse as belonging to the victim

This negates the role of the alleged perpetrator.

USE THIS



- » “The victim reported to police that [Name] raped her.”

NOT THIS



- » “The victim reported that she was raped by...”

5 Avoid using words that criminalize child victims of sex trafficking

While state law does list prostitution as a form of human trafficking of a child, the word itself has negative connotations of consent and culpability. Also refrain from language that can romanticize the role of the abuser, or sanitize a crime that compounds mental, emotional, physical and sexual abuse of child victims.

USE THIS



- » Child victim of human trafficking, sex trafficker
- » Charged with rape of a child

NOT THIS



- » Child prostitute, john, pimp
- » Charged with paying for sex

6 Avoid framing stories in a way that implies responsibility by the victim, or harms the credibility of the victim’s account

Extensive details of a victim’s clothes or appearance, a third-party’s unsubstantiated comments or opinions on a victim’s lifestyle or perceived age, an alleged perpetrator’s high regard or trusted status in the community - these can contribute to victim blaming and the idea that the victim is responsible for the alleged perpetrator’s behavior.

USE THIS



- » Shared, said, told, reported
- » According to police reports/victim statements
- » The victim/youth/child/minor stated that

NOT THIS



- » Confessed, admitted, disclosed
- » Allegedly punched and kicked the alleged victim before allegedly dragging them outside

Further Considerations: To Allege or Not To Allege? That is the Alleged Question.

The definition of allege is to assert without proof or before proving. Even the meaning of the word, according to Merriam-Webster, fluctuates between positive and negative connotations. Depending on its use in news stories allege can imply doubt. While applying the term to an alleged perpetrator because they are innocent until proven guilty makes sense ethically and legally, applying the same term to a victim may prompt belief that they are lying. Overusing the word in a story can also unfairly devalue information.

7 Avoid using details of abuse for the sake of shock

When a child is the victim of a violent crime, it is paramount that the journalist weigh what information is necessary to inform the public and encourage community action, and what details will only serve to cause harm to the victim or their family. Be careful not to frame a story as a single tragic event perpetrated by a monstrous parent, sibling, relative or other alleged abuser as this can deter larger community conversations related to social services or the prevention of future abuse.

8 Empower the community to protect children

Provide data or information to educate the public on the prevalence of child abuse, how to report it, and what social services are available to assist families in preventing abuse before it starts. Include any relevant mandatory reporting law. Check your state site for information, or visit childwelfare.gov for a searchable database of state laws. Consider including the following:

- Any state mandatory reporting law. Go to your state government website, or search the Children’s Bureau database at childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/state/
- State hotline for reporting child abuse
- Crisis nurseries, parenting classes and support groups
- State domestic violence hotline and area shelter information
- Contact information for your Prevent Child Abuse America state chapter: preventchildabuse.org
- Contact information for your National Children’s Alliance state chapter: www.nationalchildrensalliance.org

Resources for Journalists:

- » [National Children’s Alliance](http://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org) is the national association and accrediting body for Children’s Advocacy Centers. The nonprofit works to promote and support communities with comprehensive care through hundreds of centers nationwide for child abuse victims to provide better outcomes. www.nationalchildrensalliance.org.
- » [Child Welfare Information Gateway](http://childwelfare.gov) promotes the safety, permanency, and well being of children, youth, and families by connecting child welfare, adoption, and related professionals as well as the public to information, resources, and tools covering topics on child welfare, child abuse and neglect, out-of-home care, adoption and more. childwelfare.gov
- » [Society for Professional Journalists](http://spj.org) is a nonprofit, professional organization that includes broadcast, print and online journalists, journalism educators, and students interested in journalism as a career. The SPJ is dedicated to encouraging the free practice of journalism and stimulating high standard of ethical behavior. spj.org
- » [RAINN \(Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network\)](https://www.rainn.org/news/how-does-your-state-define-consent) is a nonprofit anti-sexual assault organization. RAINN operates the National Sexual Assault Hotline, as well as the Department of Defense Safe Helpline. Their site also includes a [searchable database](https://www.rainn.org/news/how-does-your-state-define-consent) of consent laws, mandatory reporting laws, etc., by state. <https://www.rainn.org/news/how-does-your-state-define-consent>
- » [National Domestic Violence Hotline](http://thehotline.org) is a nonprofit organization providing confidential support and services 24/7 to victims of domestic violence. Resources and information on domestic violence, healthy relationships, abuse and more can be found at their site. thehotline.org

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