



## NCERCC Practice Guide "Talking together"

### Part 1

#### Staff Training Framework

#### Module: "Acoustic Safety & Anti-Bias Communication"

##### 1. Training Objective

To train residential practitioners to recognise how gendered vocal biases (like penalising vocal fry or high pitches) impact care quality, and to teach them how to use their own voices to build emotional safety for traumatised children.

##### 2. Core Modules & Exercises

###### Three acoustic pillars

| <b>Auditory Bias</b>                      | <b>Intentional delivery</b>               | <b>Deep Listening</b>                 |
|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <b>Overcoming assumptions about pitch</b> | <b>Mastering volume, speed, and pitch</b> | <b>Listening to meaning, not tone</b> |

##### Pillar 1: Unpacking Auditory Bias

- **The Lesson:** Society systematically trains people to view higher-pitched voices or young women using "vocal fry" (a raspy, low register) as less intelligent, whiny, or manipulative.
- **The Reflection:** The group explores whether they mistakenly view a resident's flat tone as "boredom" or a high-pitched defence mechanism as "drama."
- **Practical Activity ("The Transcript Test"):** Read an aggressive or emotional quote written by a resident on paper. Next, listen to audio recordings of the same quote read in different pitches (high/screaming vs. low/creaky). The group evaluates how their internal judgment shifts based solely on the speaker's vocal style.

## **Pillar 2: Intentional Delivery (The Anti-Thatcher Rule)**

- **The Lesson:** Former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher changed her natural voice to a lower pitch to project power. In residential care, forced or fake dominance can sound cold and unsafe to a child.
- **The Reflection:** True safety comes from an authentic, relaxed voice, not from putting on a fake "tough" persona.
- **Practical Activity ("The Breath Anchor"):** Train staff to breathe deeply using their stomach, not their chest. This naturally anchors the voice in its true, calm register, removing the high pitch caused by stress or adrenaline.

## **Pillar 3: Deep Listening (Content Over Sound)**

- **The Lesson:** Traumatized children often lose control of their voices when they feel threatened. They might mumble, squeak, or speak with an edge.
- **The Reflection:** Care workers must listen past the unpleasant tone to hear the core message.
- **Practical Activity ("Decoding the Fry"):** Listen to simulated audio clips of a teenager using heavy vocal fry while expressing a serious safety concern. The group practice rewriting the issue to focus entirely on the core message, completely ignoring the vocal style.

## **Part 2**

### **De-escalation Blueprint**

#### **Focus: Tone, Pitch, and Acoustic Entrainment**

When a child experiences a trauma response, their nervous system switches to survival mode. They cannot process complex words. Instead, they scan the adult's voice to see if they are safe.

**Use these specific acoustic adjustments to help them calm down:**

#### **1. Drop Pitch to Your "Modal" Register**

- **The Trap:** When stressed, adults naturally tighten their throat muscles. This pushes the voice into a high, defensive pitch that a child's brain associates with danger or panic.
- **The Strategy:** Actively lower your vocal pitch to your normal, relaxed chest register. A deep, steady resonance acts as a calming anchor for a child's frantic mind.

## 2. Slow Down the Tempo (Pacing)

- **The Trap:** Speaking fast signals urgency and heightens fear.
- **The Strategy:** Cut your speaking speed in half. Leave deliberate 3-second pauses before you respond. This proves to the child that there is no immediate emergency and gives their brain time to process what you are saying.

## 3. Apply Vocal Entrainment (The Mirror Effect)

- **The Principle:** Human nervous systems naturally match each other. If a resident is shouting and you speak with steady calmness, their brain will slowly alter its rhythm to match yours over time.
- **The Technique:** Do not try to shout over an escalated child. Speak at a quiet, controlled volume just below theirs. As they listen to hear you, their volume will naturally (mirror) drop to meet your level.

Child (Escalated):— HIGH PITCH / LOUD / FAST ———▶ (Brain in Survival Mode)  
Staff (Regulated): ◀ LOW PITCH / SOFT / SLOW—— (Entrainment Pulls child)

## Acoustic Safety Checklist

- **Avoid Sharp Word Endings:** Soften your consonants (like *t*, *p*, and *k*). Sharp, snappy sounds can mimic a threat response.
- **Watch Your Sighs:** A long, heavy breath out can sound like judgment or exhaustion to a sensitive child.
- **Ditch the Sarcasm:** Sarcasm changes your pitch in a way that sounds unpredictable and unsafe to a child.

## Part 3

### House Policy Document

**Title: This house is committed to be aware of the way we talk with each other  
(Linguistic Equity and Anti-Microaggression Policy)**

#### 1. Purpose

The home is a sanctuary where everyone has a right to be heard. This policy is aimed at eliminating bullying, mocking, and discrimination based on gendered vocal traits, regional accents, or speech patterns.

## **2. We will consciously avoid (Tone Policing)**

- Voice Mimicry - Copying or mocking vocal fry, high pitch, or accents.
- Tone Policing - Refusing to help a child until they alter their tone of voice.
- Shaming - Telling each other how they "should" speak based on their identity.

### **Voice Mimicry and Caricature**

- Mocking or copying a resident's vocal fry, high pitch, lisp, stutter, or regional accent is strictly forbidden.
- This includes making fun of inflections or uptalking (making statements sound like questions), or street slangs.

### **Tone Policing as a Barrier to Care**

- Grown-ups will not refuse to help a child simply because of their tone of voice, unless there is an immediate safety threat.
- Grown-ups will try to avoid saying things like: *"I will not listen to you until you lose that attitude/speak in a normal voice."*
- Grown-ups will try to say things like: *"I can hear how upset you are, and I am listening. I want to make sure I understand everything you need."* Connect this to Reframing – responding to what is beyond, beneath and before a behaviour ([NCERCC-Reframing-final-271124.pdf](#))

### **Vocal Shaming especially regarding gender**

#### **Examples**

- Grown-ups and children will not tell girls they sound "too loud," "too bossy," "shrill," or "whiny."
- Grown-ups and children will try not tell boys they sound "weak," "too high," or "not manly enough."

## **Part four**

### **Restorative Intervention Protocol**

When someone acts in a way we have not agreed we use a restorative approach:

#### **RESTORATIVE RESPONSE STEPS**

1. Intercept Immediately —► Stop the comment calmly and clearly.
2. Shift Focus to Safety —► Explain how vocal mocking causes harm.

### 3. Model True Listening —► Show how to value the message, not the sound.

**Step 1: Intercept Immediately.** Stop the comment without causing a scene.

- *Example: "We've agreed we will not mock how people talk."*

- **Step 2: Shift Focus to Acoustic Safety.** Explain the impact of the comment.

- *Example: "When you make fun of her/his voice, it makes this room feel unsafe for her/him to speak up. Let's focus on what she/he is trying to tell us."*

- **Step 3: Model True Listening.** Pivot the conversation back to the message, not the sound.

- *Example: "Alex, you were sharing something important. Please continue, we are listening."*

## Part five

### Four realistic role-play scenarios designed for a staff team meeting.

They are built specifically to help residential child care workers practice identifying auditory bias, managing their own vocal delivery, and challenging linguistic microaggressions.

#### How to Run These Scenarios in Your Meeting

- **Pairings:** Divide staff into groups of two or three.
- **The Setup:** One person plays the child, one plays the grown-up, and the third (if available) acts as the **Observer** using the feedback criteria.
- **The Rule:** Focus entirely on **how** words are spoken (pitch, pace, volume, and tone), not just the words themselves.
- **Timing:** Run the role-play for 3 minutes, then spend 5 minutes reflecting on the questions provided.

### Scenario 1: The "Vocal Fry" Misunderstanding

**Focus:** Overcoming bias against speech traits like "vocal fry" (creaky, flat voice) or "uptalking" (making statements sound like questions).

- **The child (Chloe, 15):** Chloe is sitting on the sofa, looking at her phone. She is talking in a very flat, low, creaky voice (vocal fry) and dragging out her words. She says: *"Like... my room is freezing? And like... nobody ever listens to me anyway? So, whatever."* She is genuinely cold and upset, but her voice sounds bored and dismissive.

- **The grown-up:** Your goal is to address Chloe's freezing room without reacting to her "indifferent" or "whiny" tone.
- **The Challenge:** Avoid the trap of thinking Chloe doesn't care or is being disrespectful. Remember to avoid saying, "*Lose the attitude,*" or "*Speak properly.*"
- **Discussion Questions:**
  - *For the grown-up group as a whole:* Did you find yourself feeling annoyed by the resident's vocal style before you even answered?
  - *For the person 'playing' the child:* Did the staff member focus on your freezing room, or did they focus on your "tone"? How did that make you feel?

## Scenario 2: The "Thatcher Effect" Traps in Co-Regulation

**Focus:** Avoiding an artificially deep, harsh, or "forced authoritative" voice during an argument.

- **The child (Leo, 13):** Leo has been told it is time to turn off the games console. He stands up, puffs out his chest, and raises his voice: "*You can't make me! You're not my boss!*" His voice is cracking, high-pitched, and panicky.
- **The grown-up:** Your goal is to get Leo to step away from the console.
- **The Challenge:** Do not use a forced, deep, dominant "police officer" voice to overpower him. Instead, practice breathing from your stomach, dropping your pitch to your natural chest register, and lowering your volume.
- **Discussion Questions:**
  - *For the observers:* Did the grown-up's voice sound calm and authentic, or did it sound like they were putting on a "tough" performance?
  - *For the person playing the child:* When the staff member dropped their pitch and volume, did your nervous system feel less threatened or more threatened?

## Scenario 3: Intercepting Peer-to-Peer Vocal Bullying

**Focus:** Upholding the house policy when a resident mocks a peer's voice.

- **The Context:** Three people are in the kitchen.
- **Child 1 (Mia, 14):** Mia speaks in a high-pitched, fast, excited voice about a school project.

- **Child 2 (Jake, 16):** Jake rolls his eyes and loudly mimics Mia in a squeaky, exaggerated voice: *"Oh my god, look at my little school project, I'm so clever!"*
- **The grown-up:** Your goal is to step in immediately using the *Restorative Intervention Protocol* from the house policy.
- **The Challenge:** to contain Jake's behaviour firmly without shouting, shaming him, or escalating the kitchen environment. Pivot the safety back to Mia.
- **Discussion Questions:**
  - *For the group:* Was it difficult to address the behaviour without sounding punitive or angry?
  - *For the person playing child 1 (Mia):* Did the staff member's intervention make you feel protected, or did it make you feel more embarrassed?

#### **Scenario 4: The De-escalation "Mirror"**

**Focus:** Using vocal entrainment (slowing down and softening) to calm a panicked, fast-talking child.

- **The child (Liam, 11):** Liam has just come back from a family visit. He runs into the office, breathing heavily, speaking at lightning speed in a very high pitch: *"They-said-they-aren't-coming-next-week-and-it's-not-fair-and-everyone-is-lying-to-me-and-I'm-leaving!"*
- **The grown-up:** Your goal is to ground Liam and slow his breathing down using only your voice.
- **The Challenge:** Do not match his fast pace. Speak at exactly half his speed. Use soft consonants, and leave massive 3-second pauses between your sentences to force his brain out of survival mode.
- **Discussion Questions:**
  - *For the person playing the child:* Did the staff member's slow pacing make you feel like they were taking you seriously, or did it feel too slow?
  - *For the grown-up:* How hard was it to resist the urge to speak quickly when the child was flooding you with rapid information?

#### **Quick Evaluation Checklist for the Team Leader**

Copy this quick checklist onto a whiteboard or notepad during the meeting to help people give feedback to each other after each role-play:

- Did the grown-ups keep their voice in their **natural chest register** (modal voice)?

- Did they speak at a **controlled, slow pace**, or did they rush their words?
- Did they completely avoid **tone policing** (e.g., asking the resident to change *how* they speak)?
- Did they leave **quiet pauses** to let the room breathe?

### **Scenario 5: Regional Accents, Cultural Slang, and Professionalism Bias**

**Focus:** Overcoming the hidden bias that correlates regional accents, "street" slang, or multicultural youth dialects with aggression, lower intelligence, or antisocial behaviour.

- **The child (Tariq, 16):** Tariq has spent the afternoon trying to sort out an issue with his college course enrolment. He comes to the office looking stressed, using his natural regional accent and cultural slang (e.g., Multicultural London English or local regional dialect). He says: *"Bro, it's peak, innit. The college man dem are moving bare shifty with my timetable. I'm telling you, they're taking man for an idiot. It's a joke, bruv."* He is frustrated with the college system, not aggressive toward staff. (see Nell Keddie Tinker Tailor – the myth of cultural deprivation especially chapters by William Labov and Jane Torrey – free to access book here [Tinker, tailor; the myth of cultural deprivation; : Keddie, Nell, comp : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#))
- **The grown-up:** Your goal is to help Tariq sort out his college timetable.
- **The Challenge:** Do not judge Tariq as being "aggressive," "unprofessional," or "street." Avoid the urge to correct his grammar or tell him to speak "properly." Listen directly to the core issue: the college has messed up his timetable, and he feels disrespected by them.
- **Discussion Questions for the Team:**
  - *For the group:* Did Tariq's use of slang make you automatically feel like he was being confrontational or escalating, even though he was venting about external college staff?
  - *For the person playing the child:* Did the staff member validate your frustration, or did you feel like they were looking down on how you express yourself?
  - *For the group:* How can we ensure we don't code-switch into an overly formal, professional voice that makes children feel like they are being processed by a system rather than supported in a home?

## Common Phrases to Avoid (and What to Say Instead)

This handy table can be printed out or put on a staff noticeboard. It highlights common, everyday phrases that accidentally trigger shame, reinforce gender/cultural bias, or escalate **a child in crisis**.

| What Staff Say<br>(The Trap)                                 | Why it is harmful                                                                                                     | What to say instead                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| "Lose the attitude." or<br>"Don't speak to me in that tone." | This is tone policing. It tells the child that how they sound is more important than what they are suffering through. | "I can hear how angry/upset you are right now, and I am listening to what you need."                                                                                                                      |
| "Calm down and speak properly."                              | Implies their natural regional accent, slang, or stress-induced pitch is broken or uneducated                         | "Take your time. I am right here, and we can sort this out together                                                                                                                                       |
| "You're being incredibly whiny / shrill right now."          | Uses highly gendered insults that shames young people (especially girls) for high-pitched, emotional expressions      | "I want to make sure I don't miss anything you're saying. Let's take a slow breath together.""                                                                                                            |
| "Lower your voice if you want my help."                      | Sets up a power struggle.                                                                                             | An escalated child's nervous system literally cannot lower its volume on command.(Drop your own volume to a whisper): "I am going to keep my voice quiet so it feels safer for both of us while we talk." |
| "Speak English / Don't use that street talk with me."        | Invalidates cultural identity and creates an "us vs. them" barrier between staff and young people                     | "I want to make sure I understand exactly what happened. What does [slang word] mean in this situation?"                                                                                                  |
| "Why do you have to be so dramatic?"                         | Dismisses a high-pitched or fast-paced trauma response as attention-seeking behaviour                                 | "I can see you're completely overwhelmed right now. You are safe here."                                                                                                                                   |

## Tips for the Facilitator Running the Meeting

When wrapping up the meeting, remind staff of these **three golden acoustic rules**:

1. **Slang is connection:** For many young people, slang and regional dialects are a shield or a way to feel like they belong. Stripping them of that language in their own home makes them feel unsafe.
2. **Safety sounds quiet:** You cannot shout a child calm. The most powerful tool a care worker has is a quiet, slow, and naturally pitched voice.
3. **Hear the pain, not the pitch:** When a child's voice cracks, creaks, or goes high, it is a map of their nervous system under stress. Respond to the stress, never to the sound.

## **Part six**

### **An introduction for children to their new home**

Welcome to Your New Home

A Guide to Living, Speaking, and Being Yourself Here

Hello, and welcome! We are so glad you are here. Moving to a new place can feel scary, exciting, or a little bit of both. This is your home now. Our number one job is to make sure you feel safe, comfortable, and cared for just exactly as you are.

In this house, being yourself means you get to use your own voice. This guide explains how we talk to each other, how we listen, and how we make sure everyone feels safe to speak up.

#### **Your Voice Matters Here**

We know that everyone has a unique way of talking. Your voice is a part of who you are, and we love that. In this home, we promise to try to make safe to speak. **You are always safe to speak your mind, and our agreement here is that no one makes fun of how anyone sounds.**

#### **Our Promises to You:**

- **We listen to your words, not just your tone:** If you are upset, tired, or angry, your voice might sound flat, high, loud, or quiet. That is okay! We will focus on what you need, not just how your voice sounds.
- **Your accent and slang belong here:** Whether you use street slang, words from your culture, or have a strong regional accent, that is your language. We will not tell you to "speak properly."
- **You don't have to change your voice to be heard:** Girls don't have to be quiet, and boys don't have to sound tough. You can just be you.

## **The voice promise**

We promise to never mock, copy, or tease the way you talk. This is a house where you can always speak up.

## **House Rules: How We Talk to Each Other**

Because we want everyone to feel safe, we have a few simple rules about how we use our voices together in this house.

- **No Voice Mocking:** We never copy, tease, or mimic the way someone else talks. Making fun of someone's accent, slang, stutter, or pitch is a form of bullying, and it is not allowed here.
- **Listen with Respect:** When someone else is speaking, we give them time to finish their thoughts. We do not interrupt or talk over them.
- **Say What You Need:** You never have to keep secrets or hide your feelings because you are worried about how your voice sounds. If you are angry, you can tell us you are angry. We are trained to listen and help.

## **What to Expect If Things Get Tough**

Living with other people means we won't always agree on everything. Sometimes, you might feel completely overwhelmed, angry, or scared. When that happens, your body might go into stress mode, and your voice might change.

**Here is what the grown-ups in this house will do to help you feel safe again:**

- **We will speak quietly:** We will never try to shout over you or match your anger. We will drop our voices to a calm, quiet whisper to help your brain realize you are safe.
- **We will slow down:** We will speak slowly and take big pauses. This gives you time to breathe and process what is happening.
- **We will stay with you:** Even if you mumble, scream, or find it hard to find the right words, we will stay calm and help you through it.

## **What to Do If Someone Makes Fun of Your Voice**

If anyone, younger or older, makes fun of how you talk, uses hurtful words, or tells you that you sound "wrong," please tell a grown-up immediately.

This home takes this very seriously. We will use our **Restorative Steps to address the hurt:**

1. We will stop the unfair comments straight away.

2. We will remind everyone that all voices are equal here.
3. We will make sure you get to finish saying what you wanted to say in peace.

## **My Welcome Page**

*(You can fill this out with your key worker if you want to!)*

- **My Name:** \_\_\_\_\_
- **Words or slang I like to use when I'm happy:**  
\_\_\_\_\_
- **When I am very stressed out, my voice usually gets:**
  - Really loud and fast
  - Quiet and hard to hear
  - Flat and silent
- **The best way an adult can use their voice to help me calm down is:**  
\_\_\_\_\_

## **Part seven**

### **OUR VOICE PROMISE TO YOU**

#### **A Pledge from the Grown Ups to Every Child in This House**

We know that your voice is a part of who you are. Your accent, your words, your slang, and your tone belong to you. We promise to protect your right to speak up and be heard.

**As the grown-ups who care for you, we are committed to:**

- **Listen to Your Meaning, Not Just Your Tone**
  - We will never ignore what you need just because you are angry, tired, or upset.
  - Your feelings matter more to us than how "perfectly" you say them.
- **Never Mock, Copy, or Tease Your Voice**
  - This house is a mockery-free zone.
  - We will never make fun of your slang, your accent, a stutter, a lisp, or the pitch of your voice.
- **Celebrate Your Language and Culture**

- We will never tell you to "speak properly" or shame you for using street slang or cultural words.
- Your unique way of talking is welcome here.
- **Keep Our Voices Calm and Safe**
  - When you are stressed or overwhelmed, we will not shout or match your volume.
  - We promise to drop our pitch, slow down our words, and use our voices to help you feel safe and grounded.
- **Protect You From Vocal Bullying**
  - If anyone in this house makes fun of how you speak, we will step in immediately to stop it.
  - We will make sure you can always finish saying what you want to say in peace.

SIGNED BY YOUR TEAM: