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## Opinion: Why politicians need to stop using words like 'grooming'

**Blythe Tyler**

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The most disturbing trend in our society's political discourse has nothing to do with inflation, war or voting rights.

It has to do with the language some use against opponents with whom they simply disagree. Instead of seeking common ground, they appropriate words from those of us who advocate for children. Children who try to survive some of the most heinous crimes imaginable. This political behavior not only damages who we are as a culture, it also risks reducing the effectiveness of important work that needs to happen in our communities.

Too many politicians are using words like "pedophile" against someone who does not share their points of view on politics. As someone who works to protect children from actual pedophiles, please understand what that word really means.

It refers to an adult with a diagnosable psychological disorder that causes recurrent and intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges or behaviors involving sexual activity with a prepubescent child or children. Acting on those impulses typically involves the commission of a crime, one that our society has traditionally taken seriously. That is not a word that should be used lightly.

The other word being tossed around for political and even for financial gain by some politicians is "grooming." Here is what that term really means: It is a gradual process by which adult predators manipulate children, to earn their trust and lower the child's inhibitions, with the objective of sexual abuse.

More than 90% of child abuse cases are perpetrated by someone the child knows and trusts. The grooming and manipulation of that child almost always begins long before any physical or sexual abuse takes place.

Law enforcement investigators explore that behavior while preparing abuse cases, taking it

very seriously. Yet, certain politicians continue to use that term as a kind of “code” for opponents who have different ideas of what constitutes civil liberties.

Child abuse in our country is frighteningly common. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates one in seven children was abused or neglected in 2020. Child abuse affects every community, everywhere.

In Oakland County, CARE House serves children and families from every city, township and village. In partnership with lawmakers, prosecutors, police departments, school districts, other nonprofit partners and businesses, we are working every day to prevent and treat child victims of sexual abuse.

The language we use to do our work of impacting the safety of children in dangerous situations continues to be hijacked for political purposes, and if it continues, it may begin to lose meaning when we need it the most.

In all of our communities, we must work together to talk about child abuse, how we eliminate its negative impact on children and how we do everything we can to prevent it.

What we teach our children about name-calling applies here. It is not an effective way to solve issues. Words matter.

Especially in this case, we need these words to explain and understand a horrific crime against children that crosses political and partisan lines. May the politicians looking for a soundbite or more campaign funds keep that in mind before continuing to use this language and continuing to undermine a critical mission.

*Blythe Tyler is CEO of CARE House of Oakland County, that county's nonprofit child advocacy center.*