WORKING WITH FAMILIES WHO REFUSE TO CONSENT OR ENGAGE, OR WHO DEMONSTRATE DISGUISED COMPLIANCE

PRACTICE GUIDANCE

Purpose

This guidance provides practical advice to front line practitioners and their managers for working with families who refuse to consent or engage, or who demonstrate disguised compliance.

The advice is primarily aimed at all staff who work in early help settings. It is also aimed at social workers and can be applied in statutory interventions.

Introduction

Some families will refuse to consent or co-operate when early help is suggested. Sometimes verbal consent will be given and then withdrawn when a professional attempts to engage the family. Other families will refuse offers of early help and may be suspicious of professionals’ intentions.

It is also possible that a family may appear to engage with professionals but not follow through on actions – this is known as disguised compliance. Disguised compliance can include: a lack of measurable progress at reviews, despite apparent effort and co-operation from parents; parental agreement to change but not completing agreed actions to achieve it; change occurring due to the efforts of other agencies rather than the parents; inconsistency in the areas where change is achieved with parents opting to work with some professionals and not others or on some actions and not others; children’s views differing significantly from that of the parents.

Understanding Families

Understanding why a family might refuse to consent or engage, or demonstrate disguised compliance, can help practitioners to work with families to improve their willingness to cooperate.

A lack of cooperation may be the result of fear, stigma, shame, denial, ambivalence, or the parent’s lack of confidence in their ability to change or lack of insight into their parenting capability and the impact on their children. However, lack of cooperation may be a deliberate tactic to distract professionals from identifying harmful or abusive behaviour.

Engaging Families

This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of strategies leading to successful engagement with families. It is meant as a resource for practitioners to shape their thinking and planning for working with families who refuse to consent or engage, or who demonstrate disguised compliance.
Trouble getting in touch?

- If the family has come to you from another agency or team, contact the referrer. They may have a better relationship with the family and can support you with a warm handover/joint visit.
- If you are attempting to make contact with a family by telephone, make attempts at different times of the day and on different days. Record these attempts on the family file. Check the number you have and look for an alternative in your records or on the referral if there is no response.
- If you have an address and have not been able to make contact by telephone, you might consider calling at the property to leave an invitation to the family to make contact. The invitation should be an offer of support and include contact details of a named individual.

Progress not what you expected?

- Look out for missed appointments; exaggerated co-operation and compliance; attempts to minimise professionals’ concerns or denial of the impact of the lived experience of the child; aggressive or threatening behaviour when challenged; unjustified claims of progress being made or actions carried out and a refusal to discuss key issues whilst focussing on others that have less or no impact for the child.
- Some parents may be resistant to the involvement of professionals, rather than resistant to change in itself, particularly where they feel professionals are exercising power over them instead of working with them in a supportive manner. Consider the professional relationship with parents and ensure parents feel respected and avoid judgmental language or assertions about their behaviours or motivation. Ensure that you are open and honest with families and appropriately challenge evidence of non-cooperation.
- Be alert to the risk of collusion with parents. Where parents appear co-operative, remain open to hearing the voice of the child throughout the process and always measure parents’ assertions there has been progress against the child’s lived experience. See and speak to the child regularly.
- Ensure there is evidence of improvement through the use of assessment tools and do not rely solely on the parents’ views to measure success. Cross check against the evidence, maintain ‘respectful uncertainty’ and check what parents say with other professionals.
- Without good evidence, do not be over-optimistic about progress. Share information with other professionals regularly and check on their view of progress made to challenge your assumptions.
- Challenge your approach with the family through supervision. With your supervisor, hypothesise about possible underlying issues that parents may not want to face, consider evidence carefully and reflect on the quality of parental engagement and motivation to change when progress is not being achieved. Consider citing a lack of cooperation as a reason to escalate a case, where there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that there is a risk of significant harm to a child.
- Where parents are openly hostile or aggressive, consider risk to the worker and discuss in supervision the strategies needed to overcome this risk. Always follow your organisations procedure for lone workers and home visiting. Where there is a risk to the worker there is a potential risk to any child. Re-evaluate risk to the worker and the child regularly.
- The way in which families act out their lack of cooperation with professionals may impact on children. Even when you see and speak to the child regularly, be aware that they may be
desensitised to or learned to minimise abusive behaviour. They may have learnt to appease adults or be too frightened to tell.

- Where a lack of cooperation results in open hostility or violence be open with your supervisor about the impact on you, so that you can receive appropriate support. Discussing the family and exploring the barriers will support you to reflect on the practice and develop strategies for working with the parents.
- Ensure that you are explicit about the lack of cooperation demonstrated by a family with all partners that are working with that family. This will improve the way in which interventions are coordinated and inform discussions about the welfare of the child. It will also allow information to be triangulated and more accurate conclusions drawn.

### Avoid Common Pitfalls

- Becoming over-challenging and increasing the tension between yourself and the family.
- Colluding with, accommodating or appeasing the family in order to avoid provoking a reaction.
- Becoming hyper-alert to the personal threat and distracted from observing family interactions.
- Avoiding having to challenge families – sometimes by filtering out negative information or by drawing over-optimistic conclusions.
- Feeling helpless or paralysed to make decisions about the family.

### Respecting Families – Top Tips

- Keep appointments, turn up on time and leave when you say you will.
- Understand the needs of the family. Take into account the impact of any disability and be aware of any religious or cultural needs that family has. Use this information appropriately to shape the way that you work together with them.
- Ensure that the family understands what information you will record and what happens to it.
- Ensure that the family understands what is expected of them and what you will do. Make sure you complete the tasks that you undertake.
- Check that families understand what specific meetings are for, who else is going to be there and why. Ensure they know what contribution they can make.
- Give the family a chance to bring a friend or other family member to meetings to support them.
- Check that you are being fair and that the family perceive you as being firm and fair.