

Uncooperative and Hostile Families (including Disguised Compliance)

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1. Working with Families, Parents and Carers

In the range of work undertaken by staff in all member agencies of the Leicester Safeguarding Children Board and Leicestershire and Rutland Safeguarding Children Board, direct contact with children and their families is the main feature. The very purpose of these procedures is working in partnership with families to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

Research evidence from a number of Serious Case Reviews demonstrates that when the partnership between professionals and parents and carers breaks down, the risks to the children can increase significantly. This can also be the case when parents/carers fail to cooperate or there is disguised compliance to cooperation.

A number of different factors come into play from the parents who are unable to engage with others because of their own circumstances, for example being unable to read and to tell the time, to the parents who are threatening and aggressive to any authority figures or officials at any time.

Similarly, some workers may have difficulties in dealing with particular circumstances and conflict. If they fail to recognise their own role in safeguarding the child, and management systems fail to identify any difficulties or obstacles, the child may be left unprotected and work may appear to be taking place when in fact it is not.

All agencies should have robust systems in place to assess risks to staff where any threats or assaults have taken place. Strategies for identifying and working with parents and carers who might be hostile, violent or non-compliant or disguising compliance should be put in place to protect staff and ensure that services continue to be delivered to the child.

2. The Workers and Managers

Serious Case Reviews have indicated that where parents have a reputation for hostile, bizarre or non-compliant behaviour, workers can feel uncomfortable and become anxious. This can lead to suspicions of child abuse not being as thoroughly investigated as they might otherwise have been.

The worker might:

- Only do one ring at the doorbell;
- Only wait 5 minutes for a family to arrive for an appointment;

- Not challenge when appointments are missed, is not brought to the appointment or parents turn up late;
- Accept unlikely explanations;
- Not ask to see the child alone.

3. Good Practice

Making Sense of Angry Responses

An accurate assessment of the reasons for the lack of cooperation and/or hostility and the actual level of risk involved is critical both for your personal safety and also to ensure that the risks to the child can be accurately assessed.

There are many ways of behaving in a manner which can be threatening. They include:

- Physical violence;
- Shouting;
- Swearing;
- Throwing things;
- Using intimidating or derogatory language;
- Using sexist language;
- Using written threats;
- The deliberate use of silence;
- Using domineering body language;
- Using dogs or other animals as a threat, which sometimes can be a veiled threat;
- Racial abuse.

Threats can be covert or implied as well as obvious. In order to make sense of what is going on in any uncomfortable exchange with a parent/carer, you need to ask yourself the following questions:

- Is this anger, as opposed to hostility?
- Might you have aggravated the situation by either getting angry yourself or by being patronising or dismissive?
- Is it a response to frustration, either related or unrelated to your visit?
- Does the person need to complain, possibly with reason?
- Is the behaviour deliberately threatening/obstructive/abusive?

- Is the parent/carer aware of the impact he/she is having on you?
- Is he/she so used to aggression that they don't appreciate the impact of their behaviour?
- Is this normal behaviour for this person?
- Is your discomfort disproportionate to what has been said or done?
- Are you taking this personally in a situation where hostility is aimed at your organisation?
- Is your judgement affected by fears for your own safety?

Opportunities to communicate confidentially

Although it is important to remain open with the family as far as possible, this should not be at the expense of being able to share real concerns about intimidation and threat of violence. This should always be discussed with your manager in the first instance who should advise on recording and reporting of the incident. In exceptional circumstances it may be helpful to consider 'professionals only' meetings.

Options to consider are:

- Using the exclusion criteria for Child Protection Conferences if the quality of information shared is likely to be impaired by the presence of threatening adults;
- Holding a meeting of the agencies involved to share concerns, information and strategies and to draw up an effective work plan which clearly shares decision-making and responsibilities;
- Holding a meeting to draw up an explicit risk reduction plan for workers;
- In extreme situations, instituting repeat meetings explicitly to review the risks to workers and to put strategies in place to reduce these risks;
- Joint visits with Police, colleagues or workers from other agencies;
- If workers have experienced a frightening event, debriefing with other agencies can be helpful.

If such meetings are held, it is important to ensure that the threat of risk is not exaggerated by 'group-think' and there must always be an explicit plan made of what/how/when to share what has gone on with the family. Secret discussions are unlikely to remain secret, and the aim should always be to empower the core group to become more able to be direct and assertive with the family without compromising their own safety.

Although working with uncooperative and hostile families can be particularly challenging, remember that hostile feelings can change; and families frequently respond to assertive, positive work, where they are treated with respect.

The above procedure applies to involvement with families and in all safety planning and plans for safeguarding children (including [Child Protection Plans](#) and [Children in Need Plans](#)).