

Working with non-compliance or disguised compliance by parents or carers

Working with uncooperative parents and carers

There is a range of behaviours by families towards practitioners which may be considered **uncooperative**. This may range from those who are apparently (but not genuinely) compliant, reluctant, or resistant, to those who are angry or aggressive in their response to agency involvement. In extreme cases there can be intimidation, abuse, threats of and actual violence.

Practitioners should be aware that misunderstanding may lead to a misinterpretation of compliance; behaviour may seem to be non-compliant where in fact the issue may be the way in which workers are communicating.

Practitioners must always ask themselves what it is like for the child or young person living in the household and keep their safety and welfare in focus.

Parents / carers may:

- Seem to agree, but do not follow through with agreed actions, such as improving school attendance or going to appointments.
- Miss meetings, not open the door or not answer the phone.
- Confront and challenge, making repeated complaints.
- Behave in ways that are frightening for practitioners.
- Divert attention onto their own needs, or onto one child. This results in other issues in the household being missed, or practitioners focusing on one child.
- Frighten children so they don't want to talk to practitioners, or coach children in what to say.

Risks within multi-agency work:

- Families can manipulate and split practitioner relationships. A practitioner may be told that '*you are the only one who understands*'. This can lead to a desire to 'start again'.
- Practitioners may collude with the family.
- Those practitioners who are not experiencing hostility can find themselves taking all the responsibility for working with the family.
- Those who are 'approved of' by the family may feel gratified and unable to accept that there are problems or risks or retain their professional curiosity.
- There are times when practitioners working with a family may feel paralysed in their practice and decision making, due to feeling intimidated or threatened.

Be aware that

- It is easy for delaying tactics by the family to allow drift.
- Aggressive behaviour and threats to report to the licensing authority can undermine practitioners' confidence, and lead to practitioners working defensively.
- It is possible to get diverted to the adults' needs and lose the focus on the child.
- It is easy to focus on a small material gain and lose sight of the real but subtle abuse of the child.



Good practice when working with families:

- Reflect on practice to avoid being drawn in by the parent / carers' behaviour.
- Communicate clearly, to ensure that non-compliance is not caused by misunderstanding.
- Remain **focused on the child** – discuss cases with colleagues and in supervision.
- Where there are child protection concerns explain to parents / carers that lack of cooperation is unacceptable.
- Try to establish trust through active engagement, acknowledging that the family may see things differently and demonstrating a respect for their views, whilst confronting inappropriate attitudes.
- Record and share all decisions and communications clearly.
- Parents and carers can be very plausible, make an independent check of the evidence.

How to achieve effective multi-agency working:

- Recognise when the family is not engaging so as to avoid collusion or avoidance—early recognition of resistance and failure to achieve progress with plans and agreements for the child is critical.
- Be actively supportive of each other and everyone's different experiences.
- Where there is lack of engagement agencies must share information and act together.
- Be open and honest when disagreeing.
- Be open to discussing strategies if one agency is unable to work with the family.
- Be respectful of the concerns of others.
- Be aware of the vital need to share information and safety concerns.

If you feel scared, think:

“what must it be like for a child in this family?”

Practitioners – what you can do:

- Be aware of your own feelings, where they are coming from and the impact they are having on the case (discuss in supervision and with your line manager or safeguarding lead).
- Make sure there are effective risk assessments in place so that you feel supported in your work if a family is presenting as particularly aggressive.
- Remember the importance of holding onto the values of partnership and both ethical and sensitive practice.
- Be creative and think outside the box, for example you could do a joint home visit with a practitioner who is engaged with the family, or happen to be at the school when children are collected so you can catch up with them.
- If you feel a decision about a child made by another agency is not a safe decision and leaves the child at risk of harm use the [Resolving Professional Differences Protocol](#).
- Consider where families are starting from, for example their culture and background – they may have differing views, culture and values.
- Focus on strengths as well as weaknesses.
- Line management for practitioners should also address management of risk, lone working, how to protect staff from harm and when to involve the police.



For more information about disguised and non-compliance, see:

[Disguised Compliance: Learning from Case Reviews](#)

[‘Family A’ Serious Case Review, Somerset 2018](#)

[‘Baker Family’ Case Review, Somerset July 2018](#)

If you are concerned that a child may be at risk of, or may be suffering significant harm you must contact Somerset Direct on 0300 123 2224.