

Working with difficult and distracting parents



Wiltshire Safeguarding
Children Board

A Partnership Review of a Wiltshire case in 2015 found that “ Professionals in Wiltshire are not always adequately equipped to deal with parents exhibiting distracting and contradictory behaviours, thus diminishing the child-centred focus that is their core responsibility“ and that professionals working with the families were overly optimistic about compliance with a child protection plan.

“When we call a client difficult, what we really mean is that we are having difficulty working with him/her.” (Wessler)

*“Irrespective of whether they co-operate, it is worth remembering that most parents involved in the child welfare system are involuntary participants in a process they may resent.”
(C4EO Knowledge Review 2010)*

Parents may:

- hide information
- mislead professionals
- be manipulative (Brandon et al, 2009; 2010)
- behave in ways that are frightening for professionals

Parents may also demonstrate:

Ambivalence: not sure of need to change or when families are ‘stuck’ at a certain point

Denial/avoidance: not willing to acknowledge abuse and/or purposely avoid practitioners

Unresponsiveness: no demonstrable improvements in a timely manner (despite apparent compliance)

Violence/hostility: more serious resistance when families actively display anger at practitioners

Risks within multi-agency work

- Families can be manipulative and agencies may be seen to be colluding with the family
- Those professionals who are not experiencing hostility can find themselves taking all responsibility
- Those who are ‘approved of’ and ‘praised’ by the family may feel gratified and unable to accept that there are problems or risks – retain **professional curiosity**
- There are times when all professionals working with a family may feel paralysed in their practice and decision making due to feeling intimidated or threatened

REMEMBER if you feel frightened as a professional, think how must it feel for a child living within that family

Factsheet – Working with difficult and distracting parents

What works when engaging with challenging parents?

- ✓ remaining **focussed on the child** – discuss cases with colleagues and in supervision
- ✓ working in a positive multi-agency way
- ✓ giving practical, emotional support
- ✓ being available, predictable and consistent
- ✓ seeing some resistance and reluctance as normal
- ✓ establishing a strong and well-articulated relationship - sustained relationships with families are key
- ✓ **treating families as professionally** as you do other team members

How to achieve effective multi-agency working

- 👉 be actively supportive of each other and their different experiences
- 👉 be open and honest when disagreeing
- 👉 be aware of the dangers of collusion
- 👉 be open to discussing strategies if one agency is unable to work with the family
- 👉 be aware that workers in different settings and roles may have different thresholds of concern and different experiences of having to confront difficult behaviour.
- 👉 be respectful of the concerns of others
- 👉 be aware of the vital need to share information about safety concerns

Risks if agencies are not working together

- 👉 if all agencies experience hostility, this should be managed on an inter-agency basis. If this doesn't happen everyone may back off, leaving the child unprotected
- 👉 there may be a split between those who want to appease and those who want to oppose
- 👉 everyone may collude

Professionals – 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
- 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 WSCB Escalation Policy
- 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

Things go wrong when:

- decisions about safeguarding which are felt to leave a child at risk of harm are not challenged

If you are worried about a child contact the MASH on 0300 4560108 or

Emergency Duty Service: 0845 6070 888 (5.30pm-9.00am)