

ENGAGING RESISTANT, CHALLENGING & COMPLEX FAMILIES

Background: Working with families where there are safeguarding concerns can be difficult – but it is made especially demanding when families are resistant, challenging and complex. In such cases, it is important to look at the reasons why families may not engage with services because we know that successful early intervention underpinned by positive engagement is key to improving outcomes.

Why it Matters? Many families in need of support have experienced discrimination, oppression & disadvantage which shape their interactions with professionals. Intervention by agencies can reinforce their experiences & is often viewed as further oppression which leads to further resistance & fear. Such fears may also inhibit families from discussing concerns with professionals & accessing support. The complexities of adults’ problems can come to eclipse children’s immediate needs.

Question to consider: Are your services accessible & attractive to those who may need them? Are staff given time to engage with families? Do staff have access to good supervision? Do you have regular case audits to ensure practice remains proactive? Do you have a comprehensive understanding of what life is like for the child/children in families you are working with? Is your practice relationship-based, trauma-informed & professionally curious?



Information: Reasons that may hinder family engagement include: fear of children being removed, experience of poor service, learnt behaviour, do not recognise there is a problem, disability, mental health, domestic abuse, substance use, criminal activity, lack of financial resources, low social support & trauma. This may result in ambivalence, denial/ avoidance, confrontation or even hostility/violence.

What to do: Use professional curiosity and a trauma-informed approach to reflect on why families may be resistant. The past affects the present – understand the story. A range of initiatives and approaches are required with flexibility of approach rather than strict adherence to any particular practice model. Maintain focus on the child at all times – what is life like for the child? Be realistic about what can be changed – avoid over-optimism.

Professionals’ behaviour is also a key factor. Relationship-based practice is necessary as well as an ‘eyes-wide open’ approach that ensures the child’s needs remain central. Communicating respectfully, trust & honesty, sharing goals with families, being reliable, flexible & available, understanding parents’ own needs and providing practical assistance are important. Professionals need manageable caseloads and time to engage with families.

Organisational barriers: Problems with service design & delivery can make services inaccessible or unattractive to engage with. Other factors include: preoccupation with thresholds, ‘stop/start’ service delivery, lack of multi-agency working, inactive case management and desensitisation of staff. Good supervision is key when working with resistant and complex families. When practitioners are not receiving adequate support, they tend to avoid making difficult decisions which can lead to cases being closed prematurely (Brandon et al, 2012).