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Background:

There are times when families, are referred to an agency without their full appreciation of the need for a service or indeed with open objections to that referral. Consequently, most professionals will come into contact with families whose co-operation is difficult, including those whose compliance is apparent rather than genuine, or who are more obviously reluctant, resistant or sometimes angry or hostile to their approaches. Those families that are especially difficult to engage are sometimes referred to as "hard to reach" or "highly resistant". **The issue of how to engage these challenging families is key to improving outcomes for vulnerable children.**

Resistance is rarely something that solely exists within the family, but is to some degree a product of the nature and quality of the interaction between family members & professionals.

This is crucial because it puts the spotlight on professional behaviour as both a potential cause of resistance & also our most important tool for reducing it.

Why it matters:

An analysis of Serious Case Reviews identified parental non engagement as a key theme:

"In many cases parents were hostile to helping agencies and workers were often frightened to visit family homes. These circumstances could have a paralysing effect on practitioners, hampering their ability to reflect, make judgments, act clearly, and to follow through with referrals, assessments or plans. Apparent or disguised cooperation from parents often prevented or delayed understanding of the severity of harm to the child and cases drifted. Where parents made it difficult for professionals to see children or engineered the focus away from allegations of harm, children went unseen and unheard".

"Families tended to be ambivalent or hostile towards helping agencies, and staff were often fearful of violent and hostile men. Although parents tended to avoid agencies, agencies also avoided or rebuffed parents by offering a succession of workers, closing the case, losing files or key information, by re-assessing, referring on, or through initiating and then dropping court proceedings".

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What to do?

Read the GM procedure:

[Dealing with Persistent Non-Engagement with Services by Uncooperative Families](#)

Use supervision to support reflective practice & be prepared to challenge and be challenged

Questions:

- Is the focus on the child?
- Do assessments consider the whole context of the child's life or have individual incidents been treated in isolation (start again syndrome)?
- Have assessments been updated in light of new information/risks and do they include non- resident males?
- Is there evidence of the 'rule of optimism'?
- Is further advice needed e.g. adult services substance misuse/mental health ?
- Should the case be referred or re referred to Children's Social Care?



Working with hard to engage families

Working with resistance

- Communicate openly & honestly
- Be clear about not accepting intimidatory behaviour
- Identify who actually resides with & has contact with the child
- Involve families in planning, setting & reviewing goals
- Focus on the child's welfare
- Share information & work collaboratively
- Be reliable & available
- Question comments, decisions or inconsistencies which cause any unease
- Be very persistent, research shows that practitioner 'stickability' makes a

difference to outcomes.

Information:

Research has identified a number of ways in which families may present significant challenge to practitioners. These include:

- **Ambivalence:** families are not sure of need to change or 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 ([disguised compliance](#))
- **Violence/hostility:** more serious resistance when

Reasons for non engagement:

- Don't want privacy invaded
- Have something to hide
- Refuse to believe they have a problem
- Cultural differences
- Lack understanding about what's expected of them
- Poor previous experience of professional involvement
- Resent staff changes
- Dislike/fear or dis distrust authority figures
- Fear children will be taken away

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