

Working with uncooperative families

WEBINAR SUMMARY

July 9, 2015

I. Expert:

Stephanie Delaney, international child protection adviser

II. Reasons for uncooperativeness

Mrs. Delaney started by presenting some of the key motivations why families may not cooperate with social workers, which were comprised by local safeguarding boards in the United Kingdom, focused on identifying and supporting issues on child protection.

These included:

1. Not wanting their privacy invaded;
2. Disliking and fearing authority figures;
3. Fearing their children might be taken away;
4. Cultural differences.

III. Conceptualizing uncooperativeness

The expert highlighted four categories of uncooperativeness, that she nevertheless mentioned can be interrelated and overlapping:

1. Non-engagements: missing appointments, refusing to meet or change conversations;
2. Disguised compliance: appearing to agree, but without taking any action;
3. Confrontational: constantly arguing about the procedure, questioning social workers' abilities;
4. Hostility and violence: this includes threats and actual physical assaults.

She invited the participants to think whether or not uncooperativeness can be reframed as a positive attitude, in order to engage the families, in a more pro-active way. Failing to engage uncooperative families can let children be left in abusive or at risk situation, families struggling without support or facing punitive actions and workers feeling undermined.

Mrs. Delaney highlighted additional consequences of failing to deal with uncooperativeness for these three categories of people:

1. The Child:

- a. Is forced to cope with the situation, by identifying with the family, adopting an accommodating and pleasing behavior and telling professionals that everything is alright;

- b. Becomes de-sensitive to violence and abuse
- c. Becomes too frightened to tell.

2. The Family:

- a. Experiences increase in tensions/violence, including scapegoating
- b. Is denied support or faces punitive measures applied to them;
- c. Becomes confused about expectations, with some professionals telling them that they are doing well, while other admonishing them;
- d. Could face involvement with the police/legal procedure, if becoming violent.

3. Workers:

- a. Start feeling impotent and useless;
- b. Start avoiding confrontation, by not making an effort to see the child alone, not visiting and minimizing the issues that the family might be facing;
- c. Commences to disengage, by not being proactive about approaching the family;
- d. Mirrors the family's behavior: becomes aggressive, critical and negative.

Mrs. Delaney subsequently highlighted some key questions to be considered by social workers, including:

For the child, as the primary beneficiary and consideration, what are the implications deriving from from the way the workers react and the uncooperativeness of the family?

Is specialist help and support needed to work more positively with the families? Do arrangements need to made to keep the family safe, such as join visits and selecting a neutral venue, in order to make the worker feel safer?

Mrs. Delaney finalized her presentation, by outlining some strategies for social workers to consider:

1. Understand the underlying reasons for uncooperativeness to find an appropriate solution;
2. Find entry points or mediators: other workers or family/community members with a positive attitude;
3. Provide substantial information to the family: be clear about roles and responsibilities, including by providing complaints' mechanisms;
4. Make sure the child is seen regularly and in private;
5. Use written agreements, so families are clear about expectations;
6. Review action plan with the multi-agency team more frequently than normally, perhaps every month, so that everyone can have a clear picture about how everything is progressing;
7. Determine whom the best workers to see the family are make changes when needed;
8. Use supervision/peer support to help workers process their feelings and reactions;
9. Be open and transparent about uncooperativeness: challenge families about their behavior;
10. Document all incidents, if needed.