Spotlight on working with people who services find hard to engage

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Aberdeenshire Child Protection Committee

What do we mean by 'working with people who services find hard to engage'?

The National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland (2021, updated 2023) reframes the registration category from ***Non-Compliance*** **to** ***When Services Find It Hard to Engage***, shifting the focus from blaming families to encouraging professionals to explore why engagement is difficult. Terms such as *non-engagement*, *resistance*, *disguised compliance* or *disguised non-compliance* help describe what practitioners may observe, but require careful professional assessment to understand the underlying reasons, including trauma, barriers to understanding, or plans that may not be achievable for the family. This reframing reinforces the importance of professional-curiosity looking, listening, asking direct questions, checking understanding, reflecting on our own practice and challenging assumptions to better understand what is happening for a child and family, and to know when to act rather than taking behaviors at face value.

Services can sometimes experience difficulties engaging with certain individuals or families. This may present in a variety of ways such as:

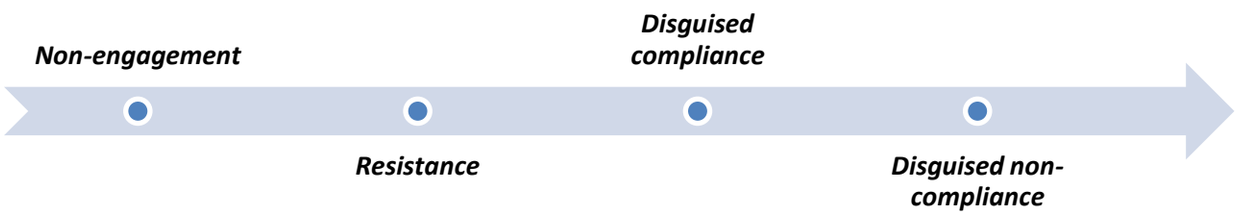
- Avoiding or limiting contact with professionals.
- Regularly cancelling or rescheduling planned appointments.
- Professionals finding it difficult to see the child or adult at risk on their own.
- Individuals or families agreeing that changes are needed but showing limited follow-through in putting these changes into action.
- Doing just enough to maintain involvement without making meaningful progress.
- Redirecting attention away from concerns by challenging, criticising, or making complaints about workers.
- Steering conversations so that the focus remains on the needs or

priorities of the family or carers, rather than on the child or adult at risk.

- Engaging inconsistently for example, attending appointments or participating with services only for short periods at a time.

What other terms might this be referred to as and why has the language changed?

Historically, these types of behaviors may have been described as:



There is currently no universally agreed language to describe situations where a person does not wish to engage with a service or intervention. Terms that have been used historically can be problematic, as they often label behaviour without exploring the underlying reasons for it.

For example, although the term *"disguised compliance"* was intended to help professionals articulate concerns about a family's behaviour, many families reported that it increased their anxiety and left them feeling judged or set up to fail. When individuals appear to agree with plans but struggle to sustain changes, their actions may then be viewed with suspicion.

Often, difficulties in engagement relate more to the accessibility of services than to the people themselves. Using terms such as *"hard to reach"* can place responsibility on individuals for not taking up support and fails to acknowledge the complex reasons someone may feel unable or unwilling to engage.

It may also risk leading professionals to assume that a person or family is “too difficult” to work with, rather than prompting reflection on what might be getting in the way of meaningful involvement.

Why might people be reluctant to engage with services?

There are many reasons why a person may feel reluctant or unable to engage with services. These may include:

- Feeling that professional involvement is intrusive or unwelcome.
- Fear or mistrust of authority figures.
- Feeling disempowered or lacking a sense of control.
- Low motivation due to stress, overwhelm, or other life pressures.
- Cultural differences that influence expectations, communication, or help-seeking.
- Not believing there is a concern or disagreeing with professional views.
- Uncertainty about what is expected of them.
- Previous negative or discouraging experiences with services.
- Wanting to avoid scrutiny due to worries about potential consequences.
- Stigma within the community, family, or peer group about seeking help.
- Fear of repercussions, particularly in situations such as domestic abuse.
- Practical barriers, such as inaccessible environments or lack of transport.
- Service-related challenges, including long waiting lists or limited opening hours.

- Communication barriers, such as differences in language or understanding.

How can I respond?

When working with people whom services are finding difficult to engage, professionals across all agencies can help improve the likelihood of positive outcomes for the child or adult at risk by:

- **Keeping the child or adult at risk central to all work** see them, speak with them alone where appropriate, explain concerns and plans clearly, and avoid becoming overly distracted by the needs or priorities of family members or carers.
- **Being professionally curious and maintaining an open, non-judgemental mindset.**
- **Using a trauma-informed approach** recognising that certain behaviours may be coping strategies linked to anxiety or previous distressing experiences with services.
- **Establishing the facts** by gathering information about what is happening, including observing verbal and non-verbal cues.
- **Critically analysing information provided** and seeking evidence to support or clarify the explanations given by the family.
- **Using chronologies** to identify patterns of behaviour and to better understand a person's capacity, readiness, or motivation to make change.
- **Communicating regularly with multi-agency partners** to share relevant information and work in a coordinated, planned way.
- **Seeking advice and support from multi-agency colleagues** to ensure that progress with the family or carers remains appropriate and focused.
- **Ensuring plans are SMART** (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound) so that any progress or lack of progress can be clearly identified.

- **Maintaining a relationship with the family that is both professional and supportive**, making it clear that the purpose of involvement is to achieve the best outcomes for the child or adult at risk.
- **Using supervision effectively** to reflect on concerns, explore biases, and consider the most appropriate next steps.
- **Remaining alert to situations where there is ongoing resistance** despite all reasonable efforts to understand and engage the family or carers, and being prepared to take the necessary action to safeguard the child or adult at risk.

Where can I learn more?

To support you and the families you work with in Aberdeenshire, the following guidance has been published:

- National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland (2021, updated 2023) Child Protection National Guidance
  It includes a full section titled "When services find it hard to engage", outlining expectations and multi-agency responsibilities.[gov.scot] (Section 4.8)

- National Framework Child protection L&D Scotland

To support with further learning and guidance please see:

- Engaging parents and families - A toolkit for practitioners | Resources | Education Scotland
- Why language matters: reframing responsibility for accessing services | NSPCC Learning
- We need to rethink our approach to disguised compliance - Community Care

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- Working with families where engagement is challenging | Research in Practice

- A Roadmap for Creating Trauma-Informed and Responsive Change

Please find the recording of the learning event here:

Live Webinar