



# **Practice Guidance**

## **Working with Resistant, Violent and Aggressive Families**

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### 1. Introduction

**1.1** As part of professional practice, there will be occasions when those working with children and their families come into contact with behaviour that may cause them to feel threatened or intimidated. Aggressive behaviour from parents/carers can seriously impact on the way that professionals interact with these families. In practice this may mean that practitioners either avoid conflict with parents by avoiding difficult discussions or even avoiding contact with the family altogether or the practitioner becomes hostile to the family.

**1.2** It may also be that workers come into contact with resistant and non-compliant families, i.e. those who deliberately sabotage efforts to bring about change e.g. by persistently failing to keep appointments.

**1.3** In such cases, this can mean that workers may fail to recognise significant areas of concern and the protection needs of the children in the family may be overlooked.

**1.4.** It is essential that staff understand that it is not unprofessional to feel threatened or intimidated. However, it is acknowledged that there can be barriers for staff which inhibit the sharing of such feelings, such as concerns about judgments being made regarding professional competence.

**1.5** There are some key principles which help to manage such work effectively:

- recognising impact on self
- keeping safe - agency responsibility/personal responsibility
- collaborative working between agencies

**1.6** Professionals, employees, managers, helpers, carers and volunteers in all agencies **must** make a referral to Herefordshire's FAST Team:

- If it is believed or suspected that a child is suffering or is likely to suffer Significant Harm, or

- Where a professional has identified unmet need in relation to a Child in Need

\* individual organisations need to identify a system for supervision and professional support. Add contact.

## **2 Making Sense of Angry Responses**

**2.1** An accurate assessment of the reasons for any hostility and the actual level of risk involved is critical to ensure that the risks to the child can be accurately assessed.

**2.2** A parent, carer or young person may be regarded as hostile and/or aggressive if they present an explicit or implicit challenge to a worker's health, safety or wellbeing. In practice this includes:

- ❖ physical violence
- ❖ shouting
- ❖ swearing
- ❖ throwing things
- ❖ using intimidating or derogatory language
- ❖ using written threats
- ❖ the deliberate use of silence
- ❖ using domineering body language
- ❖ using dogs or other animals as a threat, which sometimes can be a veiled threat
- ❖ racial abuse
- ❖ deliberately damage property of an organisation or its workers
- ❖ Knowledge of a previous conviction that suggests that they present a threat, e.g. for serious assault or gun crime

**2.3** Threats can be covert or implied as well as obvious. In order to make sense of what is going on in any uncomfortable exchange with a parent/carers, you need to ask yourself the following questions:

- ❖ Might you have aggravated the situation by either getting angry yourself or by being patronising or dismissive?
- ❖ Is it a response to frustration, either related or unrelated to your visit?
- ❖ Does the person need to complain, possibly with reason?
- ❖ Is the behaviour deliberately threatening/obstructive/abusive?
- ❖ Is the parent/carers aware of the impact he/she is having on you?
- ❖ Is he/she so used to aggression that they don't appreciate the impact of their behaviour?
- ❖ Is this normal behaviour for this person?
- ❖ Is your discomfort disproportionate to what has been said or done?
- ❖ Are you taking this personally in a situation where hostility is aimed at your organisation?

- ❖ Is your judgement affected by fears for your own safety?
- ❖ Do the family need another family member or advocate to support them and help them understand your concerns?

**2.4.** Many of the families who come into contact with professional agencies are going through periods of stress and anxiety. They may also have had experiences with professionals previously which they perceive to have been negative for them. For this reason they may react in aggressive ways to professionals and/or be abusive

**2.5.** Some families demonstrate hostility by resistance. It may be more difficult for professionals to identify the challenges inherent in working with parents who are pleasant and amenable, who agree to the need for change, but who are unable or unwilling, despite interventions, to bring the necessary change about satisfactorily. The term 'highly resistant' sits on a continuum. At one end, a certain degree of reluctance on the part of parents, who may know they need help but find it hard to accept, is to be expected. At the other end, we find a small number of highly manipulative parents who are very accomplished at misleading child welfare professionals

Factors which may indicate and evidence disguised compliance or resistance:

- ❖ No significant change at reviews despite significant input
- ❖ Parents/carers agreeing with professionals regarding changes but put little effort into making changes work
- ❖ Change does occur but as a result of external agencies/resources not the parental/carer efforts
- ❖ Change in one area of functioning is not matched by change in other areas
- ❖ Parents/carers will engage with certain aspects of a plan only
- ❖ Parents/carers align themselves with certain professionals
- ❖ Child's report of matters is in conflict with parent's/carer's report

**2.6.** Evidence from serious case reviews serves to remind us of the need to systematically and robustly review the effectiveness of interventions. Professionals need to recognise and guard against colluding with a situation which fails to meet the needs of children in the family and increase the risk of significant harm. Effective supervision will support workers in recognising collusion.

### **3. Impact on the Assessment of Children/Families**

**3.1** Accurate information and a clear understanding of what is happening to a child within their family and community is vital to any assessment. The usual and most effective way to achieve this is by engaging parents and children in

the process of assessment, reaching a shared view of what needs to change and what support is needed, and jointly planning.

**3.2** Engaging with a parent/carer who is violent and/or intimidating is obviously more difficult. The behaviour may be deliberately used to keep professionals at bay - or can have the effect of keeping professionals at bay. There may be practical restrictions to the ordinary tools of assessment e.g. observing the child in their own home. The usual sources of information/alternative perceptions, other workers and other family members, may also be kept at bay.

**3.3** It is important to explicitly work out and record what areas of assessment are difficult to achieve and why.

### **Factors which stem from the impact on the worker**

**3.4** Some coping strategies developed by workers obstruct engagement with the family.

- ❖ **Seeing each situation as a potential threat and developing a 'fight' response**, becoming over-challenging, thus increasing the tension between him or herself and the family. This may protect the worker physically and emotionally but can lead to that worker becoming desensitised to the child's pain and to the levels of violence within the home. As a result of this the harm to the child can be underestimated.
- ❖ **Colluding with parents/carers** by accommodating and appeasing them in order to avoid provoking a reaction.
- ❖ **Becoming hyper alert** to the personal threat so that the worker becomes less able to listen accurately to what the adult is saying or distracted from observing important responses of the child or interactions between the child and adults.
- ❖ **'Filtering out' negative information** or minimising the extent and impact of the child's experiences in order to avoid having to challenge. At its extreme, this can result in workers avoiding making difficult visits or avoiding meeting with those adults in their home, losing important information about the home environment.
- ❖ **Feeling helpless/paralysed** by the dilemma of deciding whether to 'go in heavy' or 'back off'. This may be either when faced with escalating concerns about a child or when the hostile barrier between the family and outside means that evidence about the child's situation appears minimal.

**3.5** When considering what the child is experiencing, many of the above may be equally relevant; the child may:

- ❖ Have become de-sensitised to violence
- ❖ Have learnt to appease and minimise
- ❖ Be simply too frightened to tell

**3.6** In order to assess how far the hostility of the parents/carers is taking a toll on your assessment of the child, ask yourself some of these questions:

- ❖ Are you colluding with the parents/carers by avoiding conflict, e.g., focussing on less contentious issues such as benefits/housing, avoiding asking to look round the house, see how much food is available, etc. or, crucially, not asking to see the child alone?
- ❖ Are you changing your behaviour to avoid conflict?
- ❖ Are you filtering out negative information, or minimising?
- ❖ Are you afraid to confront family members about your concerns?
- ❖ What message are you giving this family if you don't challenge?
- ❖ Are you relieved when there is no answer at the door?
- ❖ Are you relieved when you get back out of the door?
- ❖ Did you say, ask and do what you would usually say, ask and do when making a visit or assessment?
- ❖ Have you seen the key people?
- ❖ Is this a case of domestic abuse by a man but you only work with the woman? Is this appropriate?
- ❖ Is the child keeping 'safe' by not telling you things?
- ❖ Has the child learned to appease and minimise?
- ❖ Is the child blaming him or herself?
- ❖ What might the child have been feeling as the door closed behind you?

**3.7 It is important to realise that where an individual is perceived as dangerous to professionals, there is a strong possibility that they are also dangerous to the children and other members of the family. If professionals are scared and intimidated by a person, it is very likely that any children in that person's care may be at risk.**

#### **4. The Personal Impact on Workers.**

**4.1** Working with hostile and violent families places workers under a great deal of stress. This can have physical consequences such as sleep disturbance, shock and distress. It can have emotional and psychological consequences such as loss of confidence and self-esteem. It can have consequences for practice.

**4.2** The impact on workers of experiencing violence and hostility can be significant and can be expressed in many different ways, for example:

- ❖ Fear
- ❖ Shock
- ❖ Surprise
- ❖ Distress
- ❖ Numbness
- ❖ Denial
- ❖ Embarrassment
- ❖ Anger
- ❖ Self-doubt
- ❖ Loss of self-esteem and of personal and/or professional confidence
- ❖ Sleep and dream disturbance
- ❖ Hypervigilance
- ❖ Preoccupation with the event, or related events

- ❖ Repetitive stressful thoughts, images and emotions
- ❖ A sense of helplessness
- ❖ Stress related illness such as depression
- ❖ Appeasement

**4.3** Factors which are known to increase the impact on workers include the following.

**Previous traumatic experiences**, both in your professional and personal life, can be revived and heighten the fears.

**Regularly working in situations where violence/threats are pervasive:**

Workers in these situations can develop an adrenalin-led response which may over or underplay the threat.

**Hostage-like responses:** When faced with significant fears for their own safety, workers may develop a 'hostage-like' response. This is characterised by accommodating, appeasing or identifying with the 'hostage-taker' to keep safe.

**Threats that extend to the worker's life outside of work** can be particularly unnerving.

**Stereotypical assumptions about the higher levels of risk from men than from women and that male workers are less likely to be intimidated:**

False assumptions decrease the chances of recognition and support, e.g. male workers may find it more difficult to admit to being afraid; colleagues and managers may not recognise their need for emotional support. This may be particularly so if the perpetrator of the violence is a woman. Additionally male workers may be expected to carry a caseload that includes a disproportionate number of threatening service users.

**Lack of appropriate support and a culture of denial or minimising of violent episodes as 'part of the job'** can lead to the under reporting of violent or threatening incidents and to more intense symptoms as the worker feels obliged to deal with it alone.

**Violence and abuse** can strike at the very core of a person's identity and self-image, particularly if it is in relation to a person's race, sexuality, disability or gender. If the worker already feels isolated in their workplace due to any of these issues, the impact may be particularly acute and it may be more difficult to access appropriate support.

**4.4** A key message in this document therefore is be aware that the impact of stressful events on you can:

- ❖ limit what you can allow yourself to believe
- ❖ make you feel responsible for allowing the violence to take place
- ❖ lead to adaptive behaviour which is unconsciously 'appeasement-like'

- ❖ have an impact on your assessment or judgment
- ❖ result in a number of distressing symptoms as listed above

## **5. Action to be Taken**

**5.1** All agencies have a duty of care, as stated in the Health and Safety at Work Act (Section 2).

**5.2** Each agency should have a supervision or support system in place that is accessible to the practitioner and reflects practice needs. In any circumstance where a worker regards a family as resistant, violent and/or aggressive, that worker should immediately bring this to the attention of their line manager or workplace supervisor. Supervision should identify strategies to address:

- ❖ The safety and other welfare needs of each of the children and of other family members
- ❖ How the family can be worked with safely and effectively
- ❖ The need, or otherwise, for a formally recorded risk assessment of the situation
- ❖ Any additional support required for the workers involved with the family
- ❖ How information is to be communicated to other agencies and their staff
- ❖ Where an incident could be classified as a criminal act, the process for making a decision about whether the police should be informed and consideration of the safety implications for staff of doing so.

**5.3** Managers must consider the following:

- ❖ Has a criminal offence taken place?
- ❖ Review and taking into account of previous records and the chronology as specified in paragraph 5.6 below (is this a history rather than a one off event?)
- ❖ What needs to be done to promote a child/young person's welfare or safety?
- ❖ Joint working between staff/agencies to guard against the issues highlighted in 3.6
- ❖ External consultancy/review
- ❖ What extra support does the member of staff need/request?

There may be occasions when support for the worker is required immediately, agency policies/procedures must allow for this.

**5.4** Managers must encourage a culture of openness, where their staff are aware of the support available within the team and aware of the welfare services available to them within their agency. Managers must ensure that their staff members feel comfortable in asking for this support when they need it.

**5.5** Workers must feel safe to admit their concerns knowing that these will be taken seriously and acted upon without reflecting negatively on their ability or

professionalism. Each agency should have a system in place to ensure that workers know what action to take if they feel that their concerns are not taken sufficiently seriously (escalation procedures).

**5.6** A chronology of significant events with a 3 monthly review during supervision must be completed to:

- ❖ Aid the analysis of information
- ❖ Allow for the recognition of developing patterns
- ❖ Promote effective case management.

## **6. Keeping Safe**

**6.1** You have a responsibility to plan for your own safety just as your agency has the responsibility for trying to ensure your safety. Workers should consult their Lone Worker (or equivalent) policy and consider the following questions:

- ❖ Are my colleagues/line manager aware of where I am going and when I should be back? do they know that I am particularly at risk during this visit?
- ❖ o I have a mobile phone or some other means of summoning help?
- ❖ Could this visit be arranged at a neutral venue?
- ❖ Why am I doing this visit at the end of the day when it's dark and everyone else has gone home? Risky visits should be undertaken in daylight whenever possible.
- ❖ Does my manager know my mobile phone number and network, my car registration number and my home address and phone number?
- ❖ Do my family members know how to contact someone from work if I don't come home when expected?
- ❖ Have I taken basic precautions for my family such as being ex-directory at home and having my name removed from the public section of the electoral register?
- ❖ Have I accessed personal safety training?
- ❖ Is it possible for me to continue to work effectively with this family? if threats and violence have become a significant issue for a worker, their line manager should consider whether he or she should be released from the case and another worker allocated. In exceptional circumstances it may be necessary to transfer the case to another team or locality.
- ❖ Removing personal contact details from public documents e.g telephone directory.

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## **7. Impact on Multi-Agency Work**

**7.1** Sometimes parents/carers are hostile to all agencies. Unless this is recognised and managed on an inter-agency basis the results can be as follows:

- ❖ Everyone 'backs off', leaving the child unprotected
- ❖ The family is 'punished' by withholding of services as everyone 'sees it as a fight'. This is at the expense of assessing and resolving the situation for the child
- ❖ There is a divide between those who want to appease and those who want to oppose - or everyone colludes

**7.2** When parents/carers are only hostile to some individuals/agencies or where individuals become targets of intimidation intermittently, the risk to good inter-agency collaboration is probably at its greatest. Any pre-existing tensions between agencies and individuals, or misunderstandings about different roles are likely to surface. The risks are of splitting between the agencies/individuals, with tensions and disagreement taking the focus from the child.

- ❖ individuals or agencies blame each other, and collude with the family
- ❖ those not feeling under threat can find themselves taking sole responsibility which can ultimately increase the risk to themselves
- ❖ those feeling under threat may feel that it is personal
- ❖ there is no unified and consistent plan

## **8. Ensuring Effective Multi-Agency Working**

**8.1** Any agency faced with incidents of threat, hostility or violence should routinely consider the potential implications for any other agency involved with the family as well as for its own staff.

**8.2** Other agencies known to be working with a hostile family should be alerted to the potential dangers to their workers.

**8.3** Regular inter-agency communication, clear mutual expectations and attitudes of mutual respect and trust are the core of inter-agency working. When working with hostile or violent parents or carers, the need for very good inter-agency collaboration and trust is paramount and is also likely to be put under greatest pressure. It becomes particularly important that everyone is:

- ❖ aware of the impact of hostility on their own response and that of others and respecting of the concerns of others
- ❖ alert to the need to keep each other safe
- ❖ actively supportive of each other and aware of the differing problems which different agencies have in working within these sorts of circumstances
- ❖ open and honest when disagreeing
- ❖ aware of the risks of collusion and of the targeting of specific professions/agencies

**8.4** It is not possible to protect a child, make a proper assessment of the home situation or do what is right for the child if you are frightened or at risk

yourself and so the following strategies, suggestions and questions should be considered:

- ❖ You need to establish good, clear communication with families if you are to elicit their views, recognise their efforts and strengths and make it clear what is required of them. Positive strategies that have worked in the past may form a basis on which to build. If the family put forward blocks or resistance this should be quickly identified and shared with the family and/or your manager
- ❖ Clear records should be maintained, including records on supervision and the agreed action plan. Records should detail not only what was said or what happened but also how the worker felt
- ❖ Are the family members clear about why we are taking a particular course of action or why they are not being invited to attend meetings?

## **9. At the Point of Child Protection (s47) Enquiries**

**9.1** There are reasonable uncertainties and need for care when considering disclosing personal information about an adult. Concerns about the repercussions from someone who can be hostile and intimidating can become an added deterrent to sharing information. However, information sharing is pivotal, and being explicit about experiences of confronting hostility/intimidation or violence should be standard practice.

**9.2** If you would answer yes to any of the following questions you should raise them during child protection enquiries:

- ❖ Do you have previous experience of an adult linked to the child being hostile, intimidating, threatening or actually violent?
- ❖ Is this in specific circumstances? e.g. drink related/linked to intermittent mental health problems?
- ❖ Are you intimidated/fearful of the adult?
- ❖ If so, how have you managed your own response prior to the present child protection issue arising? (You may have been less than honest/avoided conflict.)
- ❖ Are you now in a position where you will have to acknowledge concerns for the first time? and are you fearful how they will respond to you?
- ❖ Would you want to be made aware of these concerns?

**9.3** Workers in different settings have different thresholds for concern and different experiences of having to confront difficult behaviour. It is vital that the differing risks and pressures are acknowledged and supported.

## **10 Child Protection Conferences and Core Groups**

**10.1** Avoiding people who are hostile is a normal human response. It is very damaging to effective inter-agency work under child protection plans, which depends on proactive engagement by all professionals with the family.

**10.2** Collusion and splitting between agencies will be reduced by:

- ❖ Clear agreements, known to all agencies and to the family, detailing each worker's role and the tasks to be undertaken by them
- ❖ Full participation at regular Core Group Meetings and at Child Protection Conferences: all agencies owning the concerns for the child rather than leaving it to a few to avoid wrath

### **Opportunities to communicate confidentially**

**10.3** Although it is important to remain open with the family as far as possible, this should not be at the expense of being able to share real concerns about intimidation and threat of violence. In exceptional circumstances it may be helpful to consider 'professionals only' meetings.

**10.4** Options to consider are:

- ❖ Using the exclusion criteria for Child Protection Conferences if the quality of information shared is likely to be impaired by the presence of threatening adults
- ❖ Holding a senior management meeting to draw up an explicit risk reduction plan to support workers

**10.5** If a senior management meeting is held, it is important to ensure that the threat of risk is not exaggerated by 'group-think' and there must always be an explicit plan made of what/how/when to share what has gone on with the family.

**10.6** Although working with hostile families can be particularly challenging, remember that hostile feelings can change; and families frequently respond to assertive, positive work, where they are treated with respect.