



# Safeguarding

Directors' summary **6** March 2010

*“ The attitudes and behaviour of individual practitioners have a major effect on whether families engage. ”*

*(C4EO Safeguarding knowledge review, p 39)*



This summary is intended to guide directors of children's services and their Children's Trust partners by highlighting the key findings from a knowledge review (Fauth *et al* 2010) conducted in 2010 for C4EO, within its Safeguarding theme. The focus of the review was working with vulnerable children in families that are 'resistant to change'. The review analyses this complex description, but the fundamental concern is how child protection services can better intervene with families that cannot or will not engage.

## The review considered:

- What are the circumstances, characteristics and prevalence of families that are resistant to change?
- What challenges to practice does resistance, and the underlying characteristics and circumstances, raise?
- What services, treatments and interventions are effective for families that are resistant to change?

Please go to [www.c4eo.org.uk](http://www.c4eo.org.uk) to download the full review and access to other reports within the Safeguarding theme.

## Key messages from the knowledge review

- There is no published research focusing specifically on effective services for ‘resistant’ families, where children are suffering, or are likely to suffer, significant harm. Rather, studies have tended to examine case records or practitioners’ and parents’ perceptions of the effectiveness of different aspects of services among families experiencing maltreatment recurrence, families with complex problems and families who kill or seriously injure their children. It is not possible, however, to determine whether these families were actively resisting services or were not receiving the services and support that they needed.
- Nevertheless, elements of practice that appear or are perceived to be effective include focused, long-term services rather than episodic interventions; openly dealing with the power dynamic between practitioners and families; practitioners’ conveyance of empathy and acceptance; and services that include practical help for families, families’ involvement in their treatment and social support.
- Empathy and established relationship skills remain the necessary, but insufficient conditions when working with resistant families; they need to be balanced with an eyes-wide-open, authoritative approach that is aimed at containing anxiety and ensuring that the child’s needs stay in sharp focus.
- The complexities of the adults’ problems often eclipsed children’s immediate needs. All practitioners need to be ever-vigilant to children’s needs for protection in the short and long term.
- A lack of timely and consistent services was associated with repeated maltreatment or serious injury or death of children, although a recent Ofsted report (2008) concluded that staff capacity and resources were *not* the main factors leading to serious injury or death (relative to, for example, poor communication across agencies, poor assessment practices and practitioners not recognising signs of maltreatment).
- Children in families that did not have a detailed assessment completed were four times more likely than their counterparts to experience recurrence. This suggests that receiving prompt and adequate services and assessment are important for preventing recurrence of maltreatment.
- Practitioners were able to describe behaviours and circumstances that posed challenges to their practice, but they lacked confidence when trying to identify families genuinely engaged in treatment as opposed to exhibiting ‘false compliance’.
- Families’ lack of engagement, or hostility, hampered practitioners’ decision-making capabilities and follow-through with assessments and plans. Other research described instances where practitioners become overly optimistic, focusing too much on small improvements made by families rather than keeping families’ full histories in mind.
- Practitioners should be alert to those families with changing and unstable membership, and to families whose behaviour is fluid and fast-changing, depending on the professionals they are working with.
- Gathering information for assessments is not enough – it needs to be *organised* and *analysed* – and information from a number of sources and about individuals other than mothers must be included in the analysis.
- Direct observation of parent–child interaction is essential in complex cases. More concerted effort to ensure children’s voices are captured is also needed.

## What do we know from the knowledge review?

The review incorporated evidence from studies conducted in the UK, US, Canada and Australia as well as evidence from analysis of serious case reviews in the UK. There is little focus in the research literature or in policy and legislation that directly considers ‘highly resistant families’. However, there continues to be concern

where families do not engage or cooperate with services to protect children at risk of harm, including those who may be outwardly compliant. Similarly, there is concern about families that do not demonstrate positive change despite receiving intervention and support.

The review considers a range of family responses and the reasons for them. All parents needing or seeking help can be expected to show some reluctance. At the other extreme, a small number of highly manipulative families has been emphasised by media coverage

***‘Children in families that did not have a detailed assessment completed were four times more likely to experience recurrence’***

of high-profile cases, which has influenced public and sometimes professional perceptions. The review sets out the reasons why families might be reluctant to engage with

services and find it difficult to change. It sets out models for change and considers the types of poor practice and service delivery that discourage engagement and change. These include inaccurate assessment and subsequent inappropriate services and sporadic intervention when consistency is needed.

The review sets out the evidence that identifies the circumstances and characteristics of

families that are resistant to change, that is, where maltreatment continues to occur. The review stresses that parents’ characteristics and family circumstances do not cause recurrence or resistance, but rather tend to be strongly linked to recurrence or resistance. The review noted:

- a history of prior abuse of a child is one of the most consistent and strongest predictors of recurrence
- lack of timely services: receiving prompt and adequate services and assessment are important for preventing recurrence of maltreatment. This is especially so in the early stages of contact with a family
- parent characteristics and family circumstances: multiple problems and high levels of family stress increased the likelihood of recurrence and long-term involvement in children’s services
- child characteristics: children under one year old are at particular risk. Disability is also a feature, suggesting that while disability does not cause abuse, it may serve as a source of additional stress for parents which might lead to child maltreatment.

## What do you want to do next?

The review indicates the necessary systems, workforce and skills development to support effective practice with complex families. These include:

- referral, intake and re-allocation systems, including recording, based on a history-taking approach so that recurrence and previous contact are considered
- assessment systems that provide appropriate support from the start of contact. Families say this is of considerable help, both practically and in terms of positive engagement
- assessment systems that ensure detailed, completed assessment
- review and overview systems that build on good history-taking and use chronologies to help distinguish effective and cumulative change over time from stasis or minimal change in family circumstances
- history-taking skills that understand the context of family experience over time, including experiences with social, health and education services
- analytical as well as information-gathering skills, so that information from and about

families becomes knowledge about the family and how best to ensure children’s safety and welfare

- direct observation skills, including of parent–child interaction, to supplement information gathered from conversations with parents about the family
- the service’s ability to understand and deliver ‘timely’ interventions. That is, the range of interventions, including practical as well as therapeutic support, when they are needed and useful, particularly in the early stages of contact
- a skilled safeguarding workforce that is deployed to provide this range of interventions, at any stage of contact with a child and their family
- practice in interpersonal skills, so that a worker can be clear and challenging without being unnecessarily confrontational
- quality-assured supervision and first-line management to sustain and develop all the above and specifically to contain the worker’s anxiety and maintain a focus on the child’s needs.

## Who has the information and expertise you need?

- Children's social workers are at the forefront of this work and the skills outlined above are fundamental to their role. However, some of these skills may also be held by other professionals within the Children's Trust and its partners, although they may support different roles and responsibilities.
- Therefore, skills audits within teams and across the Trust can identify where expertise sits and how it can be shared with staff holding lead responsibility for work with complex families.
- The interpersonal skills of engagement and challenge can be learned and strengthened through observation of and joint working with more experienced colleagues, of all disciplines. People who use services can be of considerable help in delivering this aspect of professional education.
- Risk assessment and other assessment tools and measures support professional expertise and decision-making. Safeguarding services should be skilled in choosing and operating these and in making critical use of the information they provide. A forthcoming publication from Research in Practice considers the place of such tools and measures more fully (Barlow and Scott, forthcoming).

Barlow, J. and Scott, J. (forthcoming) *Safeguarding in the 21st Century*, Research in Practice. Cited with permission.

Fauth, R., Jelcic, H., Hart, D., Burton, S., Shemming, D., Bergeron, C., White, K. and Morris, M. (2010) *Effective practice to protect children living in 'highly resistant' families*, London: C4EO.

Ofsted (2008) *Learning lessons, taking action: Ofsted's evaluations of serious case reviews 1 April 2007 to 31 March 2008*, London: Ofsted.

### Directors' summaries

This summary is a concise and accessible overview of C4EO's current work in this theme for directors of children's services. Please go to [www.c4eo.org.uk](http://www.c4eo.org.uk) to download full and in-depth versions.

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