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C A M B R I D G E S H I R E  
L O C A L S A F E G U A R D I N G  
C H I L D R E N B O A R D

# WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND PARENTS WHO ARE DIFFICULT TO ENGAGE

A PRACTICE GUIDE  
INFORMED BY RESEARCH

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Cambridgeshire



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# Introduction

In 2008 the LSCB Area Safeguarding Children Committee's identified areas of practice that had been highlighted locally as issues. *Improving practice in working with parents who are difficult to engage* was identified by Cambridge ASCC and Nancy Mesiter took on the challenge of reviewing existing research and identifying good practice. The culmination of her work is presented in this handbook, based on similar lines to the successful 'Child Neglect, Research Handbook to Inform Practice' already issued by the LSCB.

This handbook has the benefit of practice knowledge underpinned by an evidence base. Any professional, manager or volunteer who are challenged by families who are difficult to engage will find this handbook useful. It presents research extracts and good practice tips.

**Carol Wells**  
LSCB Training and Practice Development Manager

# Foreword

Being a member of the research group has provided me with an opportunity to read in detail about an area that I am interested in and one that I come across in my practice frequently. Colleagues have benefited from this work as it has raised additional discussion within my team and provided team members with practice tips which they have welcomed. It is a contribution to enabling practitioners to have an evidence based approach to engaging with children and their families.

Engaging with children and their families who we find difficult to engage with can be an everyday challenge for workers across all agencies, therefore it is hoped that this handbook will be used by practitioners to aid good practice by encouraging positive engagement.

**Nancy Meister**  
Social Worker - South Cambs and  
City Disabled Children's Team

## Are children and their families hard to reach or difficult to engage?

You may already be aware of these two terms and refer to families you work with as either **hard to reach** or **difficult to engage** or both. The strategies that can be applied to each are very similar and therefore this handbook refers to both groups of families. Choosing to refer to the families we support as **hard to reach** rather than **difficult to engage** helps our practice to remain positive which subsequently supports and encourages effective engagement.

We often label people as difficult which can be unhelpful and unsupportive. By approaching the families we support as hard to reach we are demonstrating a working ethic that all people are entitled to a level of support which supports them to achieve the necessary outcomes in life. As a point of reference we can refer to the 5 outcomes as identified in the Government publication,

**'Every Child Matters: change for children 2004'**

**Being Healthy** so that they are physically, mentally, emotionally and sexually healthy, have healthy lifestyles and choose not to take illegal drugs.

**Staying Safe** from maltreatment, neglect, violence, sexual exploitation, accidental injury and death, bullying and discrimination, crime and anti-social behaviour in and out of school, have security and stability and are cared for.

**Enjoying and Achieving** so that they are ready for school, attend and enjoy school, achieve stretching national educational standards at primary and secondary school, achieve personal and social development and enjoy recreation.

**Making a Positive Contribution** so that they engage in decision-making, support their community and environment, engage in law-abiding and positive behaviour in and out of school, develop positive relationships, choose not to bully and discriminate, develop self confidence, successfully deal with significant life changes and challenges and develop enterprising behaviour.

**Achieving Economic Well-being** so that they engage in further education, employment or training on leaving school, are ready for employment, live in decent homes and sustainable communities, have access to transport and material goods, live in households free from low income.

## What do we mean by difficult?

### Here are some quotes from a range of professionals

Parenting is difficult. No-one said it would be easy. Sometimes there is a lack of awareness/acceptance of just how demanding the work of a parent can be. Some parents had lousy upbringings. The child is the father to the man. Some families live in very demanding circumstances. Some are dysfunctional under pressure. Some are chaotic. Some are therefore difficult to engage. With assertive humility we insist on engaging families in their responsibilities for children. Engaging parents to support them to put children first.

**Gordon Jeyes** (2009) Office of Children and Young People

The difficulties of providing effective child protection services increases exponentially when the families or the children concerned are indifferent or avoidant. Experience teaches us that the needs of these 'difficult to reach' group are often the most acute and therefore we must strive to ensure that we are not deterred by whatever obstacles or challenges we must face. It is rather easy to state the aspiration rather more difficult to achieve it, and hence I welcome this handbook/presentation, the knowledge and learning gained will assist them to identify and overcome obstacles intended to prevent them discharging their child protection responsibilities.

**John Raine** (2009) Public Protection Department

For schools who see parents on an almost daily basis, the parent who will not engage is often the most difficult barrier to overcome. School staff work hard to foster positive parental involvement in their child's education as it is crucial to the child's development. They may, however, also need to challenge a parent's conduct or behaviour if it is putting their child at risk. This fine balance is made even more difficult if they can no longer have a dialogue with the parent and the efforts needed to try and engage the parent who will not respond or who becomes challenging is time-consuming and detrimental to the child's well-being.

**Sara Rogers** (2009) Education Child Protection Manager

Meaningful therapeutic work with children and families cannot take place outside of a collaborative approach. It is too easy to label families as "difficult to engage" without considering the huge barriers that they sometimes face in accessing help and addressing their problems. This means not only understanding the needs of the child and family but also looking closely at the help we offer and how it is offered. This handbook will be an invaluable resource to anyone working with children and their families.

**Tim Bryson**

Director of Children's Services and Nursing, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough NHS Foundation Trust.

## Why we engage with children and their families?

- Lord Laming (2003) emphasised in his report for the Victoria Climbié enquiry the importance of engaging with the child.
- A second joint Chief Inspectors' Report on Safeguarding Children (2005) stated priority must be given to listening and consulting with children. The report concluded that progress was being made in this area of practice.
- CSCI (2006) within their special study report on Supporting parents, safeguarding children, state that ensuring parents and carers needs are sufficiently well met is necessary to enable them to effectively meet the needs of their children and therefore engaging with them is imperative to achieve this.
- Cambridgeshire LSCB Serious Case Review (Child A) (2009) identified the necessity of engagement particularly with those who can be harder to engage with.
- The child should be at the centre of our practice therefore it is essential to engage with them. Dugdale (2009)
- The Executive Summary completed by Haringey LSCB (2008) states that a key issue which compounded the risk to Child A was the limited efforts made by professionals to engage with the child's father in the first stages of intervention with the family.

## Why some people get the label of 'difficult to engage'?

- Staff from different disciplinary backgrounds can hold different views about a child and their family which can influence a professional's involvement.
- Sometimes when families are most in need of assistance, they do not feel comfortable seeking help.
- Professionals can misunderstand the practical and emotional difficulties that impact on people's ability to engage.
- A difference of opinion between parents and social care professionals around the presenting needs of the family.
- A history of not receiving the help when requested by the family and only when identified by a professional.
- Professionals not having the necessary skills needed to address family's defensiveness and anxieties.
- A lack of awareness about the cultural differences and social experiences of particular groups of people e.g. a travelling family who has been alienated by their community.
- Past experiences with agencies.
- Parents own attachment history.
- Child's relationship with parents and siblings.

- Mental health problems.
- Learning Disability.
- Drug and alcohol usage.
- Limited social skills.
- Lack of awareness of what your service offers.
- Parents and carers work commitments.
- Office working hours.
- Difference of opinion about the necessity of the intervention.
- Team's not having a clear identity.
- Cultural differences and experiences.
- Lack of professional awareness and sensitivity to a family's background.

## Research Extracts: Causal factors

- Shelter (2007) state that gypsies and travellers still experience racism and discrimination and this increases their distrust in services and reluctance to engage.
- Scourfield (2006) identifies that not all child protection staff recognise that the skills required to engage with fathers should be part of their core competencies. Also that universities and training departments do not always prioritise this as an area of learning for their students and staff.
- Ghate et al (2000) state that the actual identification of a strategy in family centres to engage with fathers is more important than the actual strategy itself.
- Family and Parenting Institute (2008) state that there is still a stigma associated to services which affects engagement of families.

Whilst it is important to acknowledge that children and families can make it hard to engage, we as professionals play an important part in this and we must be self aware about the factors we contribute to the process of engagement.

Workers can become paralysed by their own fears and anxieties, which can lead to the assessment process remaining incomplete. **Brandon et al (2008)**

If we want a truly empowering model, then it's not just saying we'll work with you in a collaborative way but also saying that if you're interested, let's have a look at how you can participate in the project. **Family and Parenting Institute (2008)**

## How can we improve our engagement with children and their families?

### Understanding the factors that contribute to 'hard to reach' families:

- Past experiences with agencies.
- Parents own attachment history.
- Child's relationship with parents and siblings.
- Mental health problems.
- Learning Disability.
- Drug and alcohol usage.
- Limited social skills.
- Lack of awareness of what your service offers.
- Parents work commitments.
- Office working hours.

- Difference of opinion about the necessity of the intervention.
- Team's not having a clear identity.
- Cultural differences and experiences.
- Lack of professional awareness and sensitivity to a family's background.

Professionals will frequently make assumptions about who is reluctant to engage which subsequently can shape our involvement with children and their families. A case which was studied within the biennial analysis of serious case reviews 2003 – 2005 identified that a father who had been identified as 'always violent' wasn't actually violent when professionals attempted to engage with him but instead became violent as a consequence of his use of drugs and his possessiveness over partners.

Agencies can spend too much time deciding on who is the most appropriate team to offer a service. This uncertainty and delay of input is likely to impact on the family's interest in accepting the support and therefore potentially causing them to become difficult to engage with. Delaying the provision of services can increase risk to children and young people. **Brandon et al (2008)**

## Good Practice tips to consider:

- Consistency of allocated workers.
- Clear eligibility criteria.
- Ensure families are made aware of the emergency duty team. Lord Laming (2003) identified that families require specialist services on a 24-hour basis.
- Attempt to provide families with a seamless service that evidences the decisions are being made in the best interest of the child.
- Having the right staff.
- Scheduling appointments that families can attend.
- Practitioners to be self aware and sensitive to the family's behaviour and emotions.
- Endeavour to meet all identity needs, taking into consideration issues which may arise because of cultural differences.
- Effective work that allows trust to build.
- Access existing community resources that have good links with a range of agencies.
- An awareness that anxiety among professionals can occur at all levels of social care work and not just the high risk cases.
- Opportunity for practitioners to reflect on feeling de-skilled in their engagement with children and their parent's e.g. regular supervision.
- Listen to what parents want and value what they say.

- Work with young people on their goals and how to reach them.
- Support parents to identify their own solutions to their problems even when they have not been able to fully meet the needs of their children.
- Do not postpone intervention because getting the right help at the right time is essential to supporting children and their families.
- Advocate for the child and their family.
- Identify the best method of communication e.g. telephone calls, letter writing or face to face conversations.
- Balance the views of the parents with the protection of the child.
- Services may be provided either within general or specialist multi-disciplinary teams, depending on the severity and complexity of the problem.
- Achieve good quality relationships with families by reaching some agreement with them to the legitimacy of the enquiry and the work being undertaken.
- Understand a family's circumstance before deciding about their capacity to engage.
- Be aware of the other agencies involved with the family to assist their understanding of roles and responsibilities.
- Be transparent with families about why engagement is necessary.
- Show you acknowledge their circumstances and offer them a chance to talk about and express their feelings.
- Make sure endings are effective to support their next engagement experience.
- Be reliable and flexible.
- Remaining calm and kind towards people you support.

## Research Extracts: What helps and doesn't help

The Hopes and Fears (2003) article seeks parents views of what helps and doesn't help. Parents clearly benefit from understanding a professional's involvement and they openly rely on people to be open and honest with them. In turn this provides families and professionals with an understanding of each other which achieves a working relationship that can be understood as engagement.

### The things that parents said did not help:

- Big intimidating meetings where you don't recognise everyone and you don't know what their role is.
- Not feeling listened too or feeling like their point was misunderstood.
- Not being able to access the information because you don't have very good reading skills.
- Not being kept informed by professionals.
- Professionals making assumptions about what you would like or need to happen next.

### The things that parents said helped:

- Professionals taking time to explain things through clearly.
- Writing information down to help remember things.
- Support to get to meetings.
- Smaller sized meetings.
- Clear plan of support and what's happening next.

## What we use in Cambridgeshire to support engagement with children and their families

- **EMERGENCY DUTY TEAM:** This is a service which aims to meet the needs of families who are unable to make contact with our services during office hours. Providing this service recognises that some families are 'hard to reach' and we need to adapt our services to support their needs.
- **MULTI-AGENCY WORKING:** This brings professionals together from a range of agencies to achieve good practice in working together. This way of working will help professionals to address the needs of a family from a holistic perspective and can ensure that all parties involved contribute to a plan of action and achieve a care plan which meets all of the child or young person's needs.
- **MULTI-SYSTEMIC THERAPY SERVICE:** This is a family based treatment model. The model plans to empower families to create a home environment which promotes their health and well being.
- **FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE SERVICE:** This is a service which provides families with a safe and structured environment to discuss their concerns with each other and devise a plan of action. The service aims to bring family members together so they can support one another and make progress within their families by identifying their own problems and identifying their own solutions.

- **FAMILY SUPPORT TEAM:** This is a service that provides families with practical family support in the home. Families work alongside the support worker to make the necessary changes to help them meet the needs of their children.
- **LOCALITY TEAMS:** Families make contact with the teams on a voluntary basis for low level 1 and 2 services. The services that are on offer are flexible and wide ranging and can support parents to deal with the individual needs of the child and or young person. The service gives parents and young people control about what services they are accessing and this encourages them to engage and seek advice on issues that they may have not perhaps chosen to seek advice about.

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