

Inter Agency Guidance on Working with Hostile and Uncooperative Families

**Integrated Assessment Framework Steering Group and
Greater Glasgow City Child Protection Committee**

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1.Purpose

1.1. This guidance has been produced to assist professionals across agencies in working with hostile or uncooperative adults when a child is subject to Child Protection Registration or there are child welfare/child protection concerns. It will assist staff identify and manage the actions of adults who are hostile towards staff or uncooperative with regard to the impact on child welfare/child protection concerns. Issues of staff safety are addressed separately in agency policies on violence and aggression towards staff. These policies must be followed when working with hostile and uncooperative families.

2.Context

2.1. The nature of child welfare/child protection work can at times result in adults feeling angry and they can react in a hostile or threatening way towards the professionals who are involved with their family. It is important to remember that in the area of child welfare/protection, working with hostile and uncooperative families is often an essential part of the task. It requires skill, courage and perseverance. Staff must be supported by organisations in the challenging activity of managing these behaviours in ensuring the protection of vulnerable children.

2.2. Protecting Children and Young People: Framework for Standards addresses working with hostile families as follows:

Professionals take action to protect each child even when their parents pose a risk to workers.

3.Principles

3.1 The main principles at the heart of all work in child welfare/protection are as follows:

- The child's needs are paramount and at the centre of all child welfare/protection activity

- Professionals involved in child welfare/protection should adopt a positive and anti-discriminatory approach to adults
- Effective communication and information sharing in child protection work is crucial and this includes the work undertaken with children, parents and carers
- Issues of confidentiality must not compromise the welfare/protection of children - this includes sharing information between and within agencies with regard to adults who act in a hostile or threatening way towards workers and whose actions result in the safety and welfare of children being compromised.

4. Definitions

4.1. For the purpose of the guidance the following broad definitions are being used:

- *Hostile and threatening behaviour* – behaviour which produces a damaging effect, physically or emotionally, in other people
- *Non compliant/uncooperative behaviour* – proactively sabotaging efforts to effect change.

5. Recognising the problem

5.1. Hostile and threatening behaviour includes a range of behaviours, examples of which are:

- physical violence
- shouting
- swearing
- throwing things
- intimidating or derogatory language
- 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

(Calder , 2006)

5.2. The impact of such behaviour on individual staff will vary but the fear of violence and aggression is recognised as impacting on judgements, interpretation and intervention.

5.3. Non compliant/uncooperative behaviour includes a wide range of deliberate behaviours and attitudes such as:

- Failure to keep appointments
- Refusal to allow access to the child or to the home.

5.3. In all cases workers must be aware that behaviours of adults can be misinterpreted. For example what may appear as uncooperative behaviour may be designed to mask a hidden issue within the family such as domestic violence, drug and alcohol misuse.

6. Assessment of risk

6.1. The Bridge Childcare Development Service in their report (1997) into the death of Ricky Neave in 1994 recommended:

When a parent is considered to be threatening or hostile any presumption that they are different with their children should be resolutely tested.

The report further recommends that in such situations:

Recognition be given by managers to the impact on Social Workers and other staff of parental aggression and any fear that is aroused in them and the consequences for decision making in practice. Adequate professional supervision and support must be given in these situations.

6.2. Record keeping in relation to families must include information on any incidents. It is the responsibility of each professional, within their agency's guidelines to ensure that such information is clear and systematically recorded.

6.3. Collation of information with regard to adults who are hostile/uncooperative together with child protection concerns must be factored into the on-going assessment of risk.

7.What to do

7.1. Professionals must assess if all possible strategies have been tried to establish partnership working with the adult e.g. change of worker, use of a specialist agency where appropriate.

7.2. An assessment of the adult's capacity to understand the concerns and issues and their ability to make changes should be undertaken.

7.3. Individual staff must inform their line manager of any concerns they have with regard to adults who they have assessed as hostile or uncooperative.

7.4. Information with regard to such concerns must be communicated within and across agencies, using existing mechanisms such as review processes e.g. core group, review case conference. Where the formal system is in place it is worth reminding managers that these formalised meetings can be brought forward to address escalating concerns e.g. reconvened core groups or child protection conferences.

7.5. In the absence of a process e.g. the initial stages of the child protection investigation, following an incident involving the behaviour of a parent or carer, if a professional has concerns he/she must communicate these to other agencies.

7.6. A meeting of professionals separately may be required where there is no existing system/process for the discussion to take place and the issues addressed.

7.7. It is not acceptable for any single agency to decide to cease visiting a family home without discussion with other agencies. Decisions for children to be seen at clinics or offices (i.e. outside the family home) must be discussed at an interagency meeting and joint agreement reached regarding tactics to be employed that ensure both staff safety and child protection. It must be borne in mind that many hostile families are unlikely to keep clinic or office appointments and that such arrangements may increase staff safety but may result in parents not attending and the child being placed at increased risk. Arrangements for staff across the different agencies to regularly communicate with each other must be clear.

7.8. The meeting of professionals will focus on the needs of the child and risk factors with regard to the parents or carers behaviour. This will include:

- Information held by agencies with regard to the adult – what factors are known, pattern of any such behaviour,
- Does the adult have a history of mental illness/disorder?
- Does the adult have a medical condition which may result in a loss of self control?
- Are there issues for the parent or carer in relation to alcohol or substance misuse?
- Stress levels within the family
- Might any particular professional be perceived as a threat to the adult because of previous contact?
- Are there gender issues for consideration?
- Consideration of factors which will reduce the stress on the adult and minimise the risk of aggression e.g. being clear about the role of the professional and what he/she can or cannot do, but without compromise to the safety of the child.
- Is there new information with regards to the adult that the child is considered to be at significant risk of harm or immediate danger? If so then action must be taken without delay to ensure the child's safety. (If this information is available prior to the

meeting then immediate action should be taken without waiting for a meeting.)

- Staff safety issues, including whether it is considered safe for one worker to visit.

A plan of intervention will be developed, the prime consideration of which will be the needs and the protection of the child.

7.10. Individual staff must inform their line manager of any concerns they have with regard to adults that they have assessed as hostile or uncooperative. A discussion should take place with a senior manager in respect of management of the case and child welfare/protection. An immediate assessment requires to be made of the child's needs within this environment. Staff should utilize their own management structure to report concerns when they think that the situation has escalated.

7.11. In exceptional circumstances it may be necessary to transfer the case to another team.

8. Involvement of adults

8.1. Regular and clear inter agency communication is important. While there is the presumption of openness with adults, some situations may require a meeting of professionals involved without the adults, in order to share fully their impact on the child welfare/protection plan, the ability of the professionals involved to engage and effect change and on inter agency working.

9. Training of staff

9.1. Child Protection Committees should ensure that appropriate training is in place within agencies and that it commissions or delivers relevant inter agency training for managers and practitioners in dealing with difficult/dangerous situations in child welfare/child protection.

10. Aggression and staff safety

10.1 All agencies should have their own policies on aggression and staff safety that must be followed when working with hostile and uncooperative families.

References

Inter agency Guidance on Working with Hostile/Uncooperative Families (2006), North Lanarkshire Child Protection Committee

Protecting Children and Young People: Framework for Standards (2004)
Scottish Executive

Practice Guidance on Working with Hostile Families, (2006) Martin C Calder

Report into the Death of Ricky Neave in 1994 (1997), Bridge Childcare
Development Service