

# Professional Challenge Parental Capacity to Change



## TEA-BREAK GUIDE



### Why is Professional Challenge Important?

The notion of professional challenge is a reoccurring theme in reviews and audits carried out by the NSCB especially around the area of Neglect, as early as 2008 an analysis of Serious Case Reviews (SCR's) from 2005-2007 found that 75% of families were characterised as uncooperative and a lack of professional challenge identified (Brandon 2008). In the further reading section you will find links to 6 Step Briefings for all recent cases where this has been identified in Northamptonshire.

The aim of this guide is to provide you a snapshot into why professional challenge is so important and how you can as professionals challenge parents / carers and assess their ability to change.

### Assessment of Parental Motivation to Change

Appendix 1 of the NSCB Neglect Toolkit contains a tool to assist professionals in assessing parents / carers motivation to change. It is important that change is assessed over a period of time and not simply a snap shot not to be revisited. Assessments often focus on information gathering but often fail to consider and understand motivation and change to engage parents in that process. The tool should be used with parents, especially when their engagement with professionals is involuntary. The main messages to remember are:

- Assess both parents.
- Be child centred, especially on the timings of change, can children wait?
- Being forced to engage heightens parents' sense of failure and uncertainty.
- If parents are unsure, they are likely to respond negatively.

### Further Reading

[NSCP Neglect Toolkit – Chapter 9, Working with Resistance](#)  
[NSCP Neglect Toolkit – Appendix 1, Assessment of Parental Motivation to Change](#)

### Working with Families?

Parents and carers resist interventions in many ways and their reasons for doing so vary. At one end, parents may genuinely not understand the problem or the way it has been identified. At the other end, some parents understand they are harming their children and wish to continue to behave in this way without interference. In the middle are parents who fear authorities, have previously had poor experiences of authority, lack confidence and feel anxious about change.

When considering whether resistance is a dynamic in the family, it is helpful to clarify the identifying behaviour and possible alternative reasons for it. This is because sometimes what appears to be resistance is rather a family's frustration regarding the type and quality of service they are receiving. Resistance can be grouped into four types:

- Ambivalent;
- Denial / avoidance;
- Violent / aggressive / intimidating; and
- Unresponsive to intervention / disguised compliance.

Disguised compliance occurs when parents want to draw the professional's attention away from allegations of harm and by giving the appearance of co-operating to avoid raising suspicions, to allay professional concerns and ultimately to diffuse professional intervention. Examples of disguised compliance include a sudden increase in school attendance, attending a run of appointments, engaging with professionals such as Health Workers for a limited period of time, or cleaning the house before a visit from a professional. Learning from Serious Case Reviews indicates that the following practice is helpful:

- Focus on the child, see and speak to the child, listen and take account of what they say.
- Cross check what parents say, question the accounts they give, get additional opinions and remain curious. Above all, don't take at face value explanations that parents give for significant events or incidents.
- Address the safeguarding aspects for children who are living in chronic neglect.
- Don't be overly optimistic without sufficient evidence. Be curious about what is happening to the child.
- In supervision and within the multi-agency network consider which strategies to employ when families are hostile and keep professionals at arm's length.
- Share information with other professionals and other agencies, check your assumptions with your colleagues, and explore with each other the parent's accounts of events.