

Disguised compliance

This briefing summarises the risk factors and learning for improved practice around families and disguised compliance

October 2019

Introduction

Disguised compliance involves parents and carers appearing to co-operate with professionals in order to allay concerns and stop professional engagement (Reder et al, 1993).

Published case reviews highlight the importance of practitioners being able to recognise disguised compliance, establishing the facts and gathering evidence about what is actually happening in a child's life.

Reasons case reviews were commissioned

This briefing is based on case reviews published since 2014. It summarises and highlights the learning contained in the published reports.

The children in these case reviews became the subject of reviews following:

- non-accidental injuries, sometimes leading to death
- neglect
- ingestion of drugs.

Key issues

Parents' behaviour towards professionals

Parents and carers may minimise concerns raised by practitioners or deny that there are any risks facing children.

Parents and carers can develop good relationships with some professionals whilst criticising or ignoring others. This can divert attention away from parents' own behaviour.

Parents and carers displaying disguised compliance may manipulate professionals and situations to avoid engagement or intervention.

Some parents and carers may say the right things or engage 'just enough' to satisfy practitioners.

Engagement with professionals

Some parents and carers regularly miss or cancel appointments, promising to reschedule but not attending.

Optimism

Sometimes practitioners are over optimistic about parents' and carers' progress and ability to care for the child or their promises to engage with services.

Practitioners may rationalise parent's behaviour, for example seeing a failure to engage with services as a matter of 'parental choice' rather than non-compliance.

Practitioners in these case reviews tended to accept information from parents and carers as fact without displaying appropriate professional curiosity and investigating further.

Lack of action

In some of these case reviews, disguised compliance was suspected or discussed but no actions were put in place to tackle this.

Learning for improved practice

Recognising disguised compliance

- Local safeguarding agencies should ensure practitioners are trained in recognising and responding to disguised compliance.
- Practitioners need to remain aware that disguised compliance could be occurring.

Establish facts and gather evidence

- Practitioners should display professional curiosity when working with families and not accept information from parents and carers at face value without investigating further.
- Practitioners need to establish the facts and gather evidence about what is actually happening or has been achieved.
- Practitioners should focus on the child's lived experience rather than the parents' and carers' actions.

Unannounced visits

- To avoid seeing only what parents and carers want to present, social workers should make unannounced as well as pre-arranged statutory visits.

References

Reder, Peter, Duncan, Sylvia and Gray, Moira (1993) Beyond blame: child abuse tragedies revisited. London: Routledge.

A list of the case reviews analysed for this briefing is available on the [NSPCC Library catalogue](#).

The national case review repository makes it easier to access and share learning from published case reviews at a local, regional and national level. You can access the repository via the [NSPCC Library](#).

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