



Camden Safeguarding Children Partnership

Multi-agency guidance on working with non-engaging families (2019)

1 Introduction

Non-engagement is a situation where professionals are unable to progress work with a child and their family due to lack of access or where the level or quality of contact with a family is so limited that it makes on-going work impossible.

Non-engagement is a serious problem for professionals where there are safeguarding or child protection concerns about a child; it can make it difficult to work with the family to ensure the child's safety and welfare or to recognise when the situation has deteriorated and the risk to the child has increased.

This policy must be followed in cases where the family is receiving a statutory social work service from Children's Safeguarding and Social Work (CSSW) either as a child in need or under child protection procedures, and where professionals believe that non-engagement is causing difficulties in implementing the child's plan or affecting the network's ability to keep them safe.

The CSCP believes that in order to keep the child in focus at all times so that their welfare can be safeguarded and promoted, all forms of non-engagement and hostility must be reported to the professional's safeguarding lead officer and the child's allocated social worker and their supervisor or manager so that appropriate action can be taken. **Non-engagement may have serious implications for a child's safety and welfare and must never be ignored.**

2. Recognising non-engagement

Non-engagement by families can present in different forms:

- **Ambivalence**, consistently late for appointments or cancelling appointments; changing the subject during discussion to avoid dealing with issues.
- **Avoidance**, avoiding or failing to turn up to appointments; being unavailable for planned visits or cutting visits short.
- **Non-compliance**; actively sabotaging implementation of the child's plan either through actions or omissions.
- **Disguised compliance**; giving an outward appearance of compliance whilst subverting the implementation of the plan.
- **Confrontation**; challenging professionals, disputing facts.
- **Hostility**; threats or actual acts of violence against workers, including behaviour designed to intimidate.

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Families who are failing to engage may:

- avoid contact with professionals, or the quality of contact may be poor and characterised by resistance, an unwillingness to provide information, and a general hostility and mistrust;
- be characterised by little or no improvement to the situation and a lack of progress, resulting in the case “drifting” despite a long period of involvement with CSSW and other agencies;
- miss appointments, deny access to the family home, keep children from attending school or nursery or prevent professionals from seeing the child alone;
- appear to engage with services on the surface, but their engagement is in reality a form of resistance or disguised compliance;
- fail to take advice, attend meetings or take up services;
- minimise concerns or divert attention away from the child’s needs to their own by controlling discussions;
- manipulate the professional network by aligning themselves with one professional or targeting a professional for criticism;
- use threatening or hostile behaviour to deny or disrupt contact with the child or family;
- use complaints systems to change or control professional’s responses;
- only activate change through external pressure from agencies and /or that change is sporadic, short-lived, or limited to one area of concern.

3 Understanding why families do not engage

Understanding the reasons why families are not engaging with services is a key element to developing successful strategies for encouraging their participation or deciding on interventions where non-engagement is a serious risk to the child’s safety and welfare.

- Parental reactions to intervention by CSSW and other services may vary from fear or mistrust to a general hostility towards authority based on previous poor contacts with agencies. For some families, this may be based on experiences

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of discrimination. Involvement with CSSW is also bound to cause some stress to families particularly as involvement may be obligatory rather than through choice.

- Hostility to contact with agencies may also be based on a fear of loss of control of the home environment, and this may be particularly prevalent in cases where domestic violence is an issue. Parents may wish to maintain privacy and will resent outside interference, especially given the stigma of social work involvement with the family.
- Parents with attributes that may affect their parenting capacity, such as those suffering mental illness or coping with substance misuse, may be resistant to accepting they have a problem, or that it compromises their ability to care for their child. These attributes may also affect parents' ability to actively deal with issues or carry out their role in implementing the child's plan.
- Lack of co-operation could be due to parents not understanding the reasons for concerns or the role of the social worker and professional network, or what they are expected to do in order to change the situation. Families from abroad may not have any knowledge of the English child protection or legal system.
- The main reason for non-engagement will be a fear that their children will be removed from their care, and this may well be the case for some mothers who have already experienced this. Parents will also be fearful of being "judged" as bad parents by the professional network.
- One fear that families may have is that information provided to professionals may be passed to other agencies with whom the family may have good reason to avoid contact, for example families who are concerned about their residence status in the UK.

There are a range of cultural, social and psychological reasons for parental non-engagement, and professionals need to be able to recognise them in order to address the family's fears.

However, professionals also need to consider whether families are actively trying to cover up harm and abuse, or whether hostile and threatening behaviour is being deliberately used to keep professionals away.

4 Notifying social workers of non-engagement

Where a child is known to CSSW because of safeguarding or child protection concerns, the professional network will be jointly responsible with social workers for implementing the child's plan and monitoring their safety and welfare. Often, the plan will set out specific expectations for professionals to visit or see a child or family or to carry out a particular task or direct work.

It is essential that any difficulties in engaging families that result in a failure to implement the child's plan are reported to the child's allocated social worker and their supervisor or manager.

Professionals should also be aware of any sudden lack of engagement where it had not previously been an issue as this may indicate a change of circumstances within the household, for example a new partner joining the family.

In particular, professionals should report:

- any difficulties gaining access to a child and family as agreed in the child's plan either during visits or through meetings
- any difficulties in seeing the child alone where this is a requirement set out in the child's plan
- where contact with the family is of poor quality and makes implementation of planned work difficult or impossible
- any instance of parents exhibiting hostile, threatening or violent behaviour towards professionals
- any difficulties in implementing any part of the child's plan due to non-engagement.

Non-engagement with education, health and adult services must also be reported as this may be an indication that the situation at home is deteriorating.

Schools and nurseries should follow the procedures set out in the Children Missing from Education guidance (link below) and notify social workers of any instances of persistent non-attendance where there is no reasonable explanation or where a child is removed from the roll. <https://cscp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Children-missing-from-education-Camden-local-guidance.pdf>

Health services should notify social workers where families are failing to keep health appointments or attend clinics as agreed within the child's plan or fails to attend for universal health services such as developmental checks or immunisations.

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Health professionals should also be aware of the involvement of other health services as this may be the case where a child has complex health needs. Social workers should be notified of the involvement of all health services working with the child in order to ensure all relevant information is shared and all services are involved in the engagement strategy.

Adult social care services such as mental health, substance misuse services and domestic abuse services should notify social workers where parents are failing to engage with any services or agreed programmes of work and where there are concerns that parent's difficulties are increasing.

Although professionals should notify social workers of concerns by telephone, it is strongly recommended that this is followed up in writing and a record kept on the child's file.

Use of private health care

Health and social care staff should always be aware when families are using private health care and seek the name and professional details of any private practitioner. Consent should be sought from the patient/service user to share information based on a 'need to know basis' that is proportionate to the circumstances of the case but may be legally shared where there are safeguarding concerns.

The child/young person's GP should be aware of any on-going assessment and treatment and services that are being or will be provided by a private practitioner, particularly in the case of GP/health led referrals.

Social workers and the professional network should be notified where:

- the private practitioner's details have not been provided and there is uncertainty about whether the child or young person is receiving appropriate health assessment or treatment and services, leading to concerns about significant harm;
- there are perceived concerns about the nature of any assessment or treatment and services which may lead to the child being likely to suffer significant harm.

These cases must be discussed with social workers and a decision made on whether to escalate responses, including a child protection response.

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In complex cases requiring a multi-agency response, sharing information in a timely and appropriate manner will be an integral component of care planning. Families and data subjects (where appropriate) should be aware of this important professional dynamic.

Where important information that would enable professionals to determine 'safety' and 'well-being' is being withheld, professionals should seek advice from their safeguarding teams as to whether their concerns meet the threshold for statutory intervention.

5 Developing a multi-agency strategy for engagement

Where families are missing appointments or home visits agreed as part of the child's plan or are not engaging with agencies, this must be reported to the social worker who will follow the process set out in Appendix 1.

The allocated social worker will convene a network meeting (or core group meeting where the child is subject to a child protection plan) specifically for the purpose of looking at non-engagement and its consequences for the child.

The meeting will:

- allow the professional network to share information and review the family's patterns of engagement across agencies;
- ensure families are aware of the concerns around non-engagement and the possible consequences of not engaging;
- help professionals identify difficulties and develop a multi-agency strategy for engagement that helps reduce the barriers to a family engaging with services and strikes a balance between safeguarding the child and building a good working relationship with the family;
- keeps the child in focus and ensures that no child is left unprotected in the event that an agency decides not to take any action to engage a family in the belief that another agency will do so.

Reviewing the situation will also help the professional network to avoid being manipulated by families towards an agency "split" where families align themselves with some professionals to the exclusion of others, thus weakening partnership working.

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The meeting should consider all evidence of non-engagement and hostility in order to gauge the level of risk to the child and to inform decisions on what actions need to be taken to protect them. The network should try to identify the type of non-engagement and the reasons for this in order to inform the strategy for engagement.

In order to build good working relationships with the professional network based on honesty and openness, families should be kept informed about what work will be carried out and the processes that will be followed, and empowered to contribute to decisions where appropriate and in the review of services provided.

The meeting should also consider what further action may be taken by CSSW in the event that the non-engagement continues.

The types of engagement strategy that might be used are as follows:

- A voluntary, persuasive strategy may be useful when dealing with families who are resistant to change but have good contact with agencies and where there are no serious concerns about the child's safety or welfare.
- If the family are actively avoiding contact with agencies and there are high levels of concern, more rigorous intervention, including legal action, may be required. However, it is important that the strategy used is proportionate to the level of concern for the child.
- Families may engage well with a particular member of the professional network who could provide a "stepping stone" to re-engagement.
- Agencies should share information around similar problems in engaging the family, plus any strategies currently being used by them to successfully engage the family.
- A written agreement could be used to ensure families understand the aims of intervention, what is expected of them and how work will be reviewed and feedback given, as well as what will happen if there is no compliance. It should be clear to parents that the network will persevere in their efforts to work to safeguard and promote the child's welfare despite non-engagement.
- The professional network should try to anticipate problems and make arrangements to facilitate parents' participation such as using interpreters and being aware of issues such as low literacy levels or learning difficulties that may act as a barrier to parental involvement.

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- In cases where domestic abuse may be a factor, victims may have good reason to avoid contact with agencies, and the professional network may need to develop strategies for contacting the victim without the perpetrator's knowledge.

Generally it is considered good practice to include parents in any meeting about non-engagement in order to agree a way forward and ensure their future engagement. However, there may be some cases where a professionals only meeting may be the best way to tackle non-engagement, for example where previous attempts to hold a meeting with the family have failed or where it is known the family will not attend. This decision should be taken by the manager or supervisor and families should be informed of the outcome of any professionals meeting.

7 Working with hostile families

Some families may exhibit behaviour that professionals find threatening or intimidating, such as shouting, swearing, throwing things, verbal threats, or actual violence. It is important that hostile behaviour is dealt with as it can have serious consequences for professionals and could raise questions about the child's safety.

Professionals should report any incidents of hostility or contact with a service user that makes them feel uncomfortable or worried about their personal safety to their line manager. This is to enable managers to monitor the situation and take any necessary action under the organisation's safe working policies.

Professionals should also report any incidents to the allocated social worker who may convene a risk management meeting to include all members of the professional network. The meeting should establish whether other members of the network have experienced hostility and what strategies should be used to keep professionals safe whilst still forwarding work with the family.

The network should consider the possible reasons for hostility, for example if they are unhappy with any case decisions or the way in which the case is being conducted. However, the network should also consider whether the hostility is a deliberate attempt to keep professionals at a distance in order to hide the true situation.

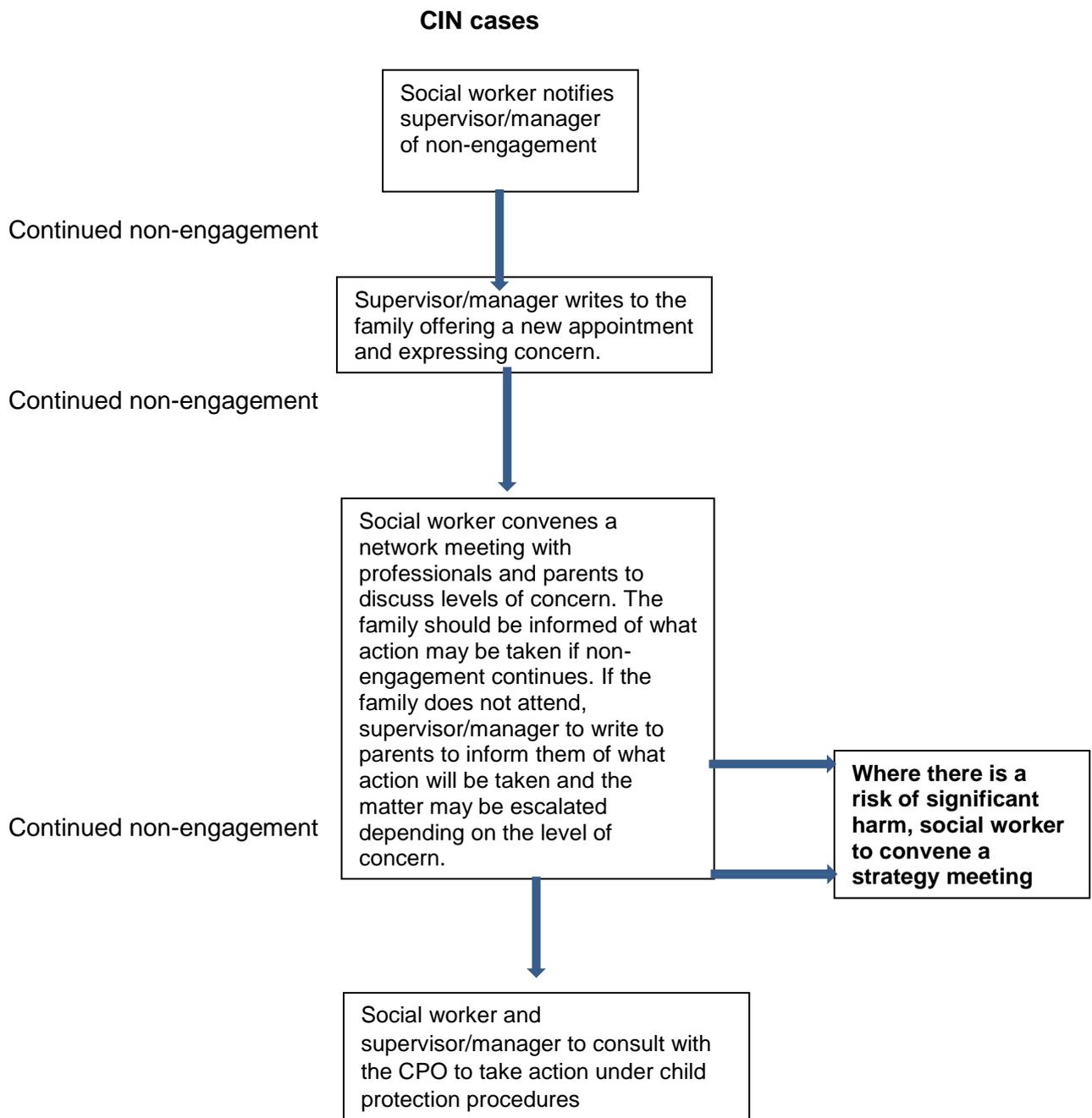
8 Complexity forum

Where non-engagement has become an issue, the professional network may wish to consider referring the case to the Complexity Panel where professionals will have an opportunity to discuss issues and consider a possible re-engagement strategy.

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Social workers and their supervisors or managers should make arrangements for the case to be referred to the Panel and it is an expectation that all members of the professional network attend the Panel for the discussion.

Appendix 1 Non-engagement escalation



CP cases

