Engagement, & Participation

Improving the protection and wellbeing of children in Europe: enhancing the curriculum

BE THE DIFFERENCE
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Engaging: Key themes from the research

- User engagement for involuntary service users raises a number of issues, including the political, economic and historical context of social work, and assumptions about service users’ ability and interest in engaging.

- There are different models of user engagement. It may be useful for social workers to clarify their own position on user engagement, and their reasons for wanting to practice it.

- User engagement needs to be balanced with social work authority and control.
Engaging: Key themes from the research

- Effective user engagement requires relationships between workers and clients in which trust and respect have been developed over the long term.

- Communication, information and explanation are crucial for user engagement to succeed.

- Involuntary service users may need support and encouragement to engage.

(Smith et al 2016)
Terminology – the search for consistency

- Research highlights that the language and meaning associated with engagement and particularly the term ‘resistance’ is at times unclear and inconsistent.

- Difficulty in specifying clear terms, e.g. ‘service-resistant’, “change resistant”, “hard to reach”, “under-represented”, “invisible” (discuss)

- Challenges exist relating to engagement as a measurable process
The ‘Under-represented’

- Refugee and asylum-seeking families
- Homeless families
- Minority ethnic families
- Traveller families
- Prisoners
- Parents of disabled children
- Parents with disabilities
- Parents with learning difficulties

(Barrett 2008)
The Invisible

- Young carers
- Fathers
- Parents with mental health problems
- Domestic violence/abuse perpetrator
- G.L.B.T, parents
- Socially isolated parents
- Families with needs below thresholds
- Homeless families
- Refused-asylum-seeking families

(Barrett 2008)
Service Resistant

- Long-term multi-problem families
- Criminally active families
- Domestic violence/abuse perpetrators
- Anti-social families
- Substance abusing parents
- ‘Fringe-dwelling’ families

(Barrett 2008)
Consider why certain families might be under represented, invisible, or service resistant?

Is it their problem, or is it a problem with social work?
Question: Why might parents/carers in particular resist the efforts of social work professionals?

Why would a consideration of resistance in each case help your overall assessment?
Ultimately, most parents/carers experience child protection as an involuntary process. This may lead them to respond in a conflicting manner, moving between resistance and compliance at different points throughout the process.

Question: Why might parents/carers resist the efforts of social work professionals?
“The constant visits and delivery of messages do not constitute a conversation and the family do not feel properly listened to or understood. Asked to change, they have no lived experience of what this might feel like; and worse still they know that these commands are issued with the expectation that they can’t change”

(Cottam 2011: 138)
Assessment and Intervention

- In the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland (2014) it’s acknowledged that the involuntary nature of child protection work means that parents or carers may react negatively to any intervention.

- This lack of engagement is often referred to as resistance (Forrester, Westlake and Glynn 2012).

- However, the term is also used in the context of resistance to change (Fauth et al. 2010).
Impact

- It is important to understand how resistance may impact on assessment and intervention practice, influence decision making and actions, and increase existing risk factors associated with a child’s care.

Group Exercise

- In groups discuss what theories might inform your practice with families who are resistant or difficult to engage with.
Critical Theory

Highlights the disadvantaged socio-economic position of many parents in the child protection system - may help practitioners to consider relevant issues such as power in relationships. (Trotter 2008)
Research suggests that resistance can manifest when parents perceive power being used over them – a theoretical understanding of conflict – which is a key element of resistance - may be helpful (Laing 2013).

In a system that many parents experience as powerful and threatening and when the stakes are seen as high, responding negatively can be seen as a normal reaction (Barter 2008, Mirick 2012).
Attachment Theory

Can offer insights into aspects of relationship based practice including parents’ own attachment history - which may influence their ability to form relationships - with their children and with professionals (Shemmings, Shemmings and Cook 2012).
Group Exercise

- In groups discuss what potential behaviours might impede access to families/children?
- What might they look like in practice?
- **Active non-compliance** with the actions set out in the Child's Plan (or Child Protection Plan); failure to enable necessary contact (for example missing appointments) or refusing to allow access to the child or to the home;

- **Disguised compliance**, where the parent/carer appears to co-operate without actually carrying out actions or enabling them to be effective; and

- **Threats of violence or other intimidation** towards practitioners.
Disguised compliance

- Apparent or disguised cooperation from parents often prevented or delayed understanding of the severity of harm to the child and cases drifted.

- Where parents engineered the focus away from allegations of harm, children went unseen and unheard” (Brandon et al., 2008, p.4).
Disguised compliance

- Recurring theme in a number of significant case reviews, over last 14 years…

- Victoria Climbie (Laming, 2003),
- Peter Connelly (Haringey LSCB, 2010),
- Declan Hainey (Renfrew CPC 2012)
- Daniel Pelka (Coventry LSCB, 2013)
- Liam Fee (Fife, 2017).
Indicators of disguised compliance

- No significant change at reviews despite significant input
- Parents/carers agreeing to required changes but little effort is made to make changes work
- Parents/carers aligning themselves with certain professionals
- Only engaging with certain aspects of a plan
- Differing progress reports from professionals
Threatening or violent behaviour towards practitioners can significantly impact capacity to carry out professional role

Behaviours can include; challenging professionals, provoking arguments, extreme avoidance, threatened or actual violence.

Individuals may have experience of getting their way through intimidation and violence.

Can also indicate a lack of trust about the professionals intentions regarding their children.
Potential impact

- Professional sees each situation as a potential threat and responds aggressively

- Professional colludes to appease carer and avoid provocation

- Professional feels threatened and is distracted from role in observing and assessing

- Professional minimises negative case information

- Childs opportunity to participate is restricted
An incomplete assessment - significant needs and risks unrecognised and not taken into account in decisions and child's plan.

The workers ability to assess the likelihood of cooperation and compliance with the child protection plan may be compromised.

Time and energy spent overcoming parental resistance can mean reduced focus on meeting the needs of the child.

Children who are aware of hostility and distrust of support services by their parents/carers may themselves adopt this behaviour.
Managers and supervisors role

- Regular supervision
- Clear messages to service users about acceptable/unacceptable behaviour towards staff
- Space to debrief
- Opportunities to reflect
- Strategies to support particular aspects of the case – such as joint visits to aggressive families
**GENUINE COMMITMENT**

Parent recognises the need to change and makes real efforts to bring about these changes.

**TOKENISM**

Parent will agree with the professionals regarding the required changes but will put little effort into making change work. While some changes may occur they will not have required any effort from the parent. Change occurs despite, not because of, parental actions.

**COMPLIANCE/APPROVAL SEEKING**

Parents will do what is expected of them because they have been told to. Change may occur but has not been internalised because the parents are doing it without having gone through the process of thinking and responding emotionally to the need for change.

**DISSENT/AVOIDANCE**

Dissent can range from proactively sabotaging efforts to bring about change to passively disengaging from the process. The most difficult parents are those who do not admit their lack of commitment to change but work subversively to undermine the process.

Considering Parental Resistance and Risk

Horwath and Morrison (1999)
GIRFEC framework

Well-being
Successful Learners
Nurtured
Active
Healthy
Achieving
Responsive
Included
Responsible
Safe
Effective Contributors

Assessment
Appropriate, Proportional, Timely

Well-being
Successful Learners
Nurtured
Active
Healthy
Achieving
Responsive
Included
Responsible
Safe
Effective Contributors

Resilience Matrix used when required for more complex situations

Adversity
Vulnerability
Protective Environment

Observing and recording
Events/Concerns/Observations/Other Information

Gathering Information and Analysis

Planning, Action and Review
Risk and Resilience: The GIRFEC Practice Model

What is the impact of adversity on elevated vulnerability?

What protective resources for parent and child can be identified and supported?

Can the parent and child be assisted to benefit from these resources?

What can be done to reduce the factors elevating the risk of harm?

What is the impact of adversity on elevated vulnerability?

**Resilience**
- Characteristics that enhance normal development under difficult conditions

**Adversity**
- Life events or circumstances posing a threat to healthy development

**Protective environment**
- Factors in the child's environment acting as buffers to the negative effects of adverse experience

**Vulnerability**
- Characteristics of the child, the family circle and wider community which might threaten or challenge healthy development
Assessment:

- In pairs: using the resistance matrix (page 65) within the risk framework document, and building on your work in sessions 4 and 5, complete the assessment for John.

- Written report reflecting on resistance, the resistance matrix and the relevance of an assessment of resistance when developing an intervention strategy (1500 words).
Final thoughts from research...

- Effective engagement requires trusting long-term relationships to be established with service users.
- Communication and providing clear, accessible information to clients is essential to enabling user involvement.
- Involuntary clients will most likely require some form of active support to express their views.
- Engaging with involuntary service users is messy and compromised; what makes the difference is the persistence and creativity of individual workers in specific circumstances.
Balancing user engagement with authority and control

“there is a point in social work practice whereby the social worker is expected to act on their own professional assessment of the situation, informed by agency policy, legal mandates and research, irrespective of what the service user’s choices or views are”

McLaughlin, 2009, p.1109
References


