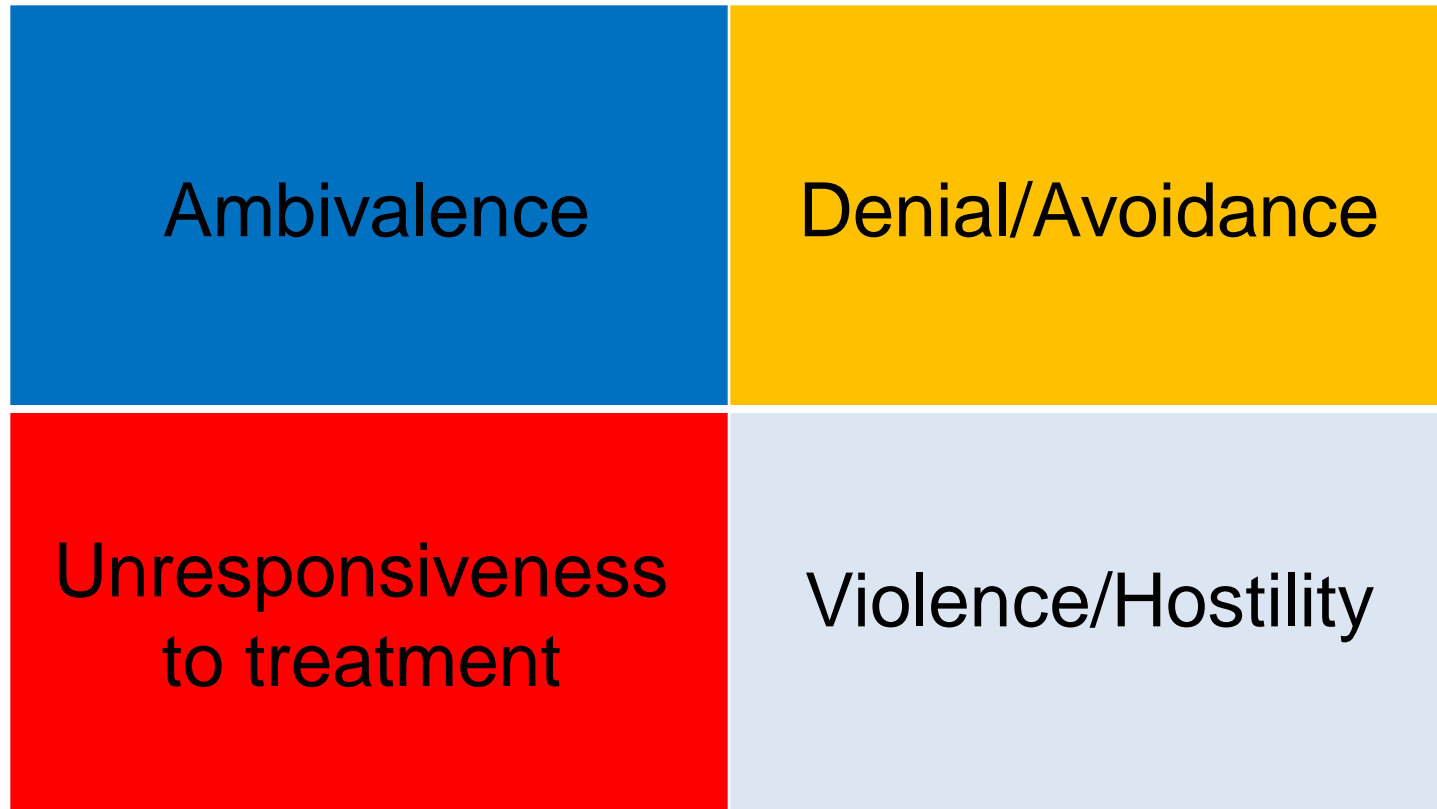


Why is this a focus for practice?

- Recent high profile child protection cases have raised concern about 'resistant' families who do not change despite intervention
- C4EO's literature review tried to identify
 - Which families should be the focus of attention
 - And, which interventions are most effective

Effective practice to protect children living in 'highly resistant' families

What is resistance?



Issues to consider

1. What are the **circumstances, characteristics** and prevalence of families that are resistant to change?
2. What **challenges to practice** does resistance, and the underlying characteristics and circumstances, raise?
3. **What interventions are effective** for families that are resistant to change?

1. What are the circumstances, characteristics and prevalence of families that are resistant to change?

Circumstances and characteristics

Key circumstances associated with recurrence:

- Families' history of abuse, particularly substantiated and repeated prior reports, one of the most consistent and strongest factors
 - Possibility of labelling and further scrutiny of these families?
- Multiple, simultaneous problems
 - Domestic violence, substance misuse, mental health problems, criminal activity, lack of financial resources, low social support

Prevalence

- Recurrence rates vary significantly between studies due to differences in study design (i.e. 25-69 per cent)
- 2005-2007 analysis of serious case reviews revealed that 75 per cent of families were characterised as 'uncooperative', which included hostility, avoidance, disguised compliance and/or ambivalence

Implications

- Difficult to describe 'highly resistant' families – very complex needs
- A 'checklist' of key indicators of resistance can be considered but it would not be a fail safe way of identifying families
- There is an need to progress beyond simple co relational research to enable assessment about causation
 - Need for longitudinal data and quasi-experimental designs to assess the impact of services

2. What challenges to practice does resistance, and the underlying characteristics and circumstances, raise?

Challenges related to families

- Practitioners are able to *describe* behaviours and circumstances that pose challenges to their practice including:
 - Inability to contact parents
 - Families' lack of motivation/commitment
 - Families that are in constant crisis
 - Violence
- *But*, they lacked confidence distinguishing between families' active engagement in treatment vs.false compliance

Challenges related to practitioners

- When working with complex families, practitioners sometimes become overly optimistic
 - Focus too much on small improvements rather than considering families' full histories
- Practitioners need to ensure they are *not*:
 - Unwilling to make critical judgements
 - Underestimating harm to children
 - Developing 'fixed views' of families that are not updated in light of contrary evidence

Challenges related to practitioners

- Practitioners involved in complex cases may lose focus on children when:
 - Parents' needs eclipse needs of children
 - Parents turn the focus away from maltreatment allegations
 - Parents make it difficult for practitioners to see children alone
 - Practitioners do not have sufficient experience/training to help parents understand how their behaviour is harmful to children
- Men, grandparents and siblings are often left out of equation

Challenges related to agencies

- False dichotomy between 'in need' and 'at risk' categories – and the threshold between them
- Practitioners feel pressured to close cases quickly and balance heavy caseloads
- Multiple (and fragmented) assessments – may lead to flawed analysis and decision-making

Implications

Practitioners may need further training on how to differentiate engagement from compliance

Practitioners need to ensure that they do not lose sight of the child in complex cases

Overcoming challenges

Practitioners need adequate time to offer targeted services

Practitioners need to find the middle ground and not be either collusive or confrontational

3. What services, treatments and intervention are effective for families that are resistant to change?

Research on effectiveness

- A few studies look at impacts of various programmes to address the needs of complex families including:
 - Intensive Family Preservation Services—provide a range of intensive, short-term services in the home
 - Multi-component – provide a package of services directed at identified problems
 - Parent training – teach parenting skills
- Likely that it is the approach that matters and how joined up and well-coordinated services are.

Research on effectiveness

Positive relationships with practitioners

Parental involvement

Practical help and social support for families

Services that help to build skills and empower families

For children, stable relationships with committed carers

Engaging complex families

- Child protection system is a powerful tool
 - Practitioners should harness this power in a positive, non-coercive manner
 - Honesty and transparency are important
- Empathy and established relationships skills such as active listening and demonstrable respect are necessary practitioner behaviours
 - *But* need to be balanced with healthy dose of scepticism
 - Evidence suggests that many practitioners display a confrontational style

Effective assessments

- Good, in-depth assessments are essential with a clear time-line (chronology) / family history
- Assessments should *not* be 'one-off' snapshots of families' behaviours and should include:
 - Observations – particularly, parent-child interactions
 - Understanding of families' histories
 - Inclusion of the whole family unit
 - Information from all agencies
- Plans following an assessment should be sustained to ensure cases do not lose momentum and that there is continuity of involvement.

Effective supervision

- Most evidence mentions the importance of **management and supervision** to safeguarding practice, but few lessons on what works
- Circumstances where good supervision is *essential* include when practitioners:
 - Are overwhelmed/lacking confidence
 - Experience violence
 - Are acting out their own strong emotions
- Joint supervision sessions with different staff could enable more effective working

Key messages

- Need for research that focuses on which services are effective for complex families
 - No research focuses on children's outcomes beyond preventing recurrence
- Attitudes and behaviours of individual practitioners seem to have an effect on whether families engage or not
- Improving the quality of joint assessments would enhance services

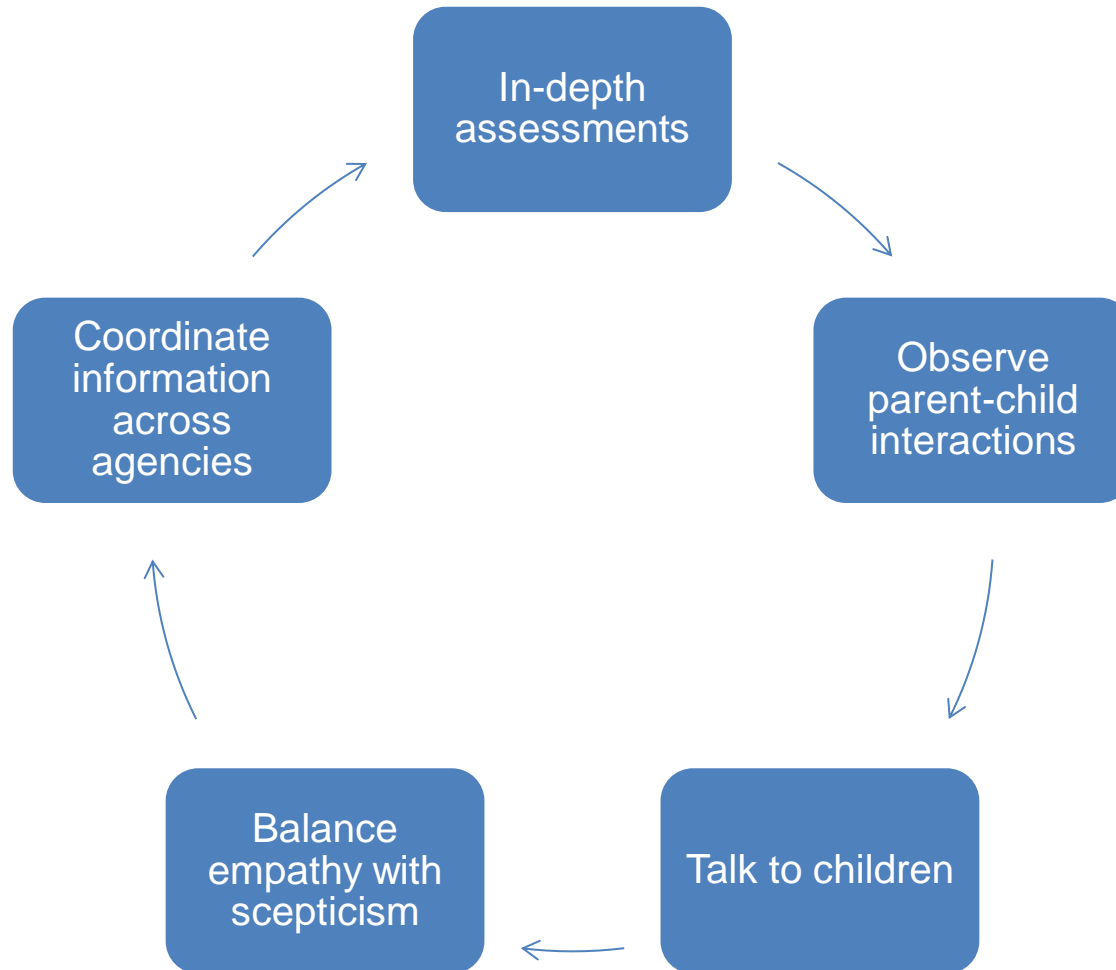
- 75% parents do not co-operate with services (includes disguised compliance & “telling workers what they want to hear”) Brandon et al, 2009

- Irrespective of whether they co-operate, it is worth remembering that most parents involved in the child welfare system are involuntary participants in a process they may resent” C4EO knowledge review 2010

“Professional Dangerous Thinking”

- rule of optimism
- start again syndrome
- cultural relativism
- assessment paralysis
- accommodation syndrome
- the idea of natural love

Implications for practice



Challenge or opportunity?

- Implications must be considered within current policy context
- Crisis of confidence in the system ...
- At a time of increased referrals, fewer resources and less national guidance
- BUT Munro review provides opportunity to refocus on content rather than process
- Review findings fit well within this approach – rediscovering professional judgement