

Disguised compliance

An NSPCC factsheet

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Our factsheet briefly explains what 'disguised compliance' refers to, when it occurs and what professionals can do to identify and counteract it.

What is 'disguised compliance'?

'Disguised compliance' involves a parent or carer giving the appearance of co-operating with child welfare agencies to avoid raising suspicions, to allay professional concerns and ultimately to diffuse professional intervention.

The term is attributed to Peter Reder, Sylvia Duncan and Moira Gray who outlined this type of behaviour in their book *Beyond blame: child abuse tragedies revisited* :

"Sometimes, during cycles of intermittent closure, a professional worker would decide to adopt a more controlling stance. However, this was defused by apparent co-operation from the family. We have called this disguised compliance because its effect was to neutralise the professional's authority and return the relationship to closure and the previous status quo." (Reder et al, 1993, pp 106-7).¹

Examples of disguised compliance would be 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.

References

1. Reder, P., Duncan, S. and Gray, M. (1993) **Beyond blame: child abuse tragedies revisited**. London: Routledge.

When does disguised compliance occur?

Disguised compliance occurs when parents want to draw the professional's attention away from allegations of harm. It is often highlighted as a theme in Serious Case Reviews. A biennial analysis of serious case reviews 2003-2005 identifies disguised compliance as a theme:

“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, 2008a).²

Apparent compliance can affect the professional's engagement with families and children. Brandon et al's analysis talks about patterns of co-operation and the effect disguised compliance has on child protection workers:

“Disguised or partial parental compliance also wrong-footed professionals. Apparent parental co-operation often prevented or delayed understanding of the severity of harm to the child” (Brandon et al, 2008b).³

References

2. Brandon, M. et al.(2008a) [Analysing child deaths and serious injury through abuse and neglect: what can we learn? A biennial analysis of serious case reviews 2003-2005. Research Brief DCSF-RB023 \(PDF\)](#). London: Department for Education and Skills (DfES).
3. Brandon, M. et al.(2008b) [Analysing child deaths and serious injury through abuse and neglect: what can we learn? A biennial analysis of serious case reviews 2003-2005. Research Report DCSF-RR023 \(PDF\)](#). London: Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

How can social workers identify and counteract disguised compliance?

Disguised compliance can make it very difficult for social workers who are involved with a family to maintain an objective view of progress in safeguarding the welfare of a child (Brandon et al, 2008).⁴

Local Safeguarding Children organisations - LSCBs or (regional) Child Protection Committees - may produce guidance for social workers to ensure professionals are aware of the practice of disguised compliance and to alert them to the signs, for instance: there may be no significant change at reviews despite significant input from professionals; the child's account may differ from

that of parents/carers; or parents/carers may put little effort into making agreed changes work (Peterborough Safeguarding Children Board, 2008).⁵

In the Victoria Climbié inquiry, Lord Laming (2003) suggested social workers needed to practice “respectful uncertainty”, applying critical evaluation to any information they receive and maintaining an open mind.⁶

Guidance from the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO) emphasises the need for professionals to constantly question all assumptions by playing the devil's advocate or bringing in a fresh pair of eyes. This can be supported through the provision of high quality supervision:

“...most commentators observe that the quality of supervision available is one of the most direct and significant determinants of practitioners' ability to develop and maintain critical mindsets and work in a reflective way” (C4EO, 2009).⁷

A knowledge review conducted early in 2010 for C4EO focuses on working with vulnerable children in families that are ‘resistant to change’. The review analyses this complex description, but the fundamental concern is how child protection services can better intervene with families that cannot or will not engage.^{8,9}

Articles by Easton (2009)¹⁰ and McNabb (2009)¹¹ provide a discussion on the theories and practices used by social workers when confronted with disguised compliance and the circumstances in which they need to put these theories into practice.

References

4. Brandon, M. et al.(2008) **Analysing child deaths and serious injury through abuse and neglect: what can we learn? A biennial analysis of serious case reviews 2003-2005. Research Report DCSF-RR023 (PDF)**. London: Department for Education and Skills (DfES).
5. Peterborough Safeguarding Children Board (2008) **Chapter F: Practice Guidance - working with hostile, non-compliant clients and those who use disguised compliance within the context of safeguarding children**. Coventry: Tri.x. In: Peterborough Safeguarding Children Board (2009) Procedures manual.
6. Laming, Lord, (2003) **The Victoria Climbié inquiry: report of an inquiry by Lord Laming (PDF)**. Norwich: TSO P205.
7. Burton, S.(2009) **The oversight and review of cases in the light of changing circumstances and new information: how do people respond to new (and challenging) information? C4EO Safeguarding: Briefing number 3 (PDF)**.

London: Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO).

8. C4EO (2010) **Safeguarding knowledge review: directors' summary 6 (PDF)**. London: Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO).

9. C4EO (2010). **Effective practice to protect children living in 'highly resistant' families (PDF)**. London: Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO).

10. Easton, M.(2009) **Baby Peter and the uncertainty principle**. BBC News online.

11. McNabb, M.(2009) **CC Live: Risk Factor Live! Working with disguised compliance and intimidation in child protection**. Community Care website.



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Page 5 of 5

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