

Guidance Note - Non-engaging families

Introduction

It is recognised that there is a continuum of behaviours on which parents and carers may evade services. These include:

- Transient lifestyles
- Patterns of avoidance
- Passive resistance
- Disguised non-compliance
- Ambivalence
- Selective co-operation
- Planned sporadic engagement
- Repeated manipulation
- Deliberate concealment
- Active non-compliance
- Hostility
- Proactive sabotage
- Threatening behaviours
- Practitioner overwhelm

When considering non-engagement, practitioners should check that the child protection concerns and necessary actions have been explained clearly, taking into account issues of language, culture and disability, so that parents/carers fully understand the concerns and the impact on themselves and their child.

Non-engagement and non-compliance, including disguised compliance, should be taken account of in information gathering and assessment. This may point to a need for compulsory or emergency measures.

However, there is a risk of “drift” setting in before non-engagement is identified. If parents/carers fail to undertake or support necessary actions, this should be monitored and the impact regularly evaluated. Good records **especially chronologies** must be kept, particularly during periods of high risk when children are not in nursery or school.

Any of the above behaviours may result in the child being unseen.

For clarity a child may be considered unseen when:

- Address unknown
- There is no reply when calls are made at the home address
- There were arrangements for professionals to see a child which are cancelled by the parent

- A parent refuses a service for their child
- A child is not brought to a pre-arranged appointment
- A pattern of re-arranging appointments is emerging
- Access to the home is offered but the child remains unseen
- A parent or care-giver is believed to be fabricating a reason for the child's unavailability
- A parent or care-giver overtly denies professional access to the child

Evaluating Risk

When staff become aware of an unseen child, an evaluation of the level of concern must be undertaken. An unseen child is not necessarily in itself a concern. Each case is unique and it is the significance of being "unseen" that needs to be assessed. This assessment should focus on the vulnerability of the child considering age and stage of development.

In all cases practitioners must be aware that the behaviours of a parent or carer can be misinterpreted. Uncooperative behaviour may also mask other concerns or issues in the family which need to be fully evaluated. However, professionals should not wait for the outcome of a comprehensive assessment before taking action in the case of an unseen child.

Responding to unseen children

The response to initial assessment should be proportionate to the identified needs and risks for the individual child. It is acknowledged that different agencies hold different thresholds that would trigger more investigation. Professionals should be clear about their agency's protocols and the appropriate communication pathways between the professional networks. The child's named person should be informed of any missed appointments which should be recorded in the child's chronology.

When there are no existing concerns about a child but those involved with a family become aware that the child has not been seen for a period of time, the staff member must in the first instance, discuss these circumstances with their line manager. Managers should support staff to reflect on their practice and consider whether the unseen child may raise a concern.

If there are no factors impacting on parenting capacity and no concerns expressed about the child, then such an unseen child would not typically warrant any further action. Further attempts should be made to access the child. Consideration should be given to any factors which may be barriers to

access/engagement e.g. disability, learning or literacy needs, housing issues etc.

However, if, during discussion with the line manager, it is agreed that there may be a concern associated with this child being unseen, the following action should be taken:

- Contact other agencies who may be involved with the family – typically the child's named person (health/education) but may include other agencies.
- Explain your involvement and the background to your concern.
- Seek information on the nature of the involvement of other agencies, including whether and when they have seen the child, and whether there are concerns either about the child or about factors that may be impacting on parenting.
- If anyone has seen the child, information about the child's presentation must be discussed and taken into account in assessing current circumstances.
- Record the nature of "child unseen" and actions taken in single agency chronology (and inform co-ordinator of multi-agency chronology).
- If concerns remain, the professional who first became aware of the unseen child should make a referral to social work and initiate an integrated assessment.
- Efforts to see the child must continue.
- Services to children and families where parents/carers are hostile should not be withdrawn without putting other protective measures in place. Key services should be maintained for children who are at risk.
- If workers have concerns that a child is unseen they have a responsibility to take action until they are satisfied that the child is not at risk of significant harm.
- Where there are existing concerns about a child, including child protection concerns, **whether or not the child's name is on the Child Protection Register**, responsive action must be taken immediately.
- In these cases, if the child has not been seen within one day of attempted contact, then this must be brought to the attention of the Lead Professional and consideration given to convening a multi -

agency meeting. For children on the child protection register this would typically be a core group meeting. For all other children this would be a planning meeting or network meeting. This meeting can consider all known information and agree actions to secure the assessment of the child's needs and risks.

- Within one day, irrespective of any meeting held, attempts should be made to contact the parent and a return visit should be undertaken. Joint visits by professionals who normally conduct home visits may be considered.
- If the child still remains unseen and the level of concern is still present it must be discussed with the Lead Professional and a plan of action agreed. (If the worker is unavailable, speak with their Team Manager)
- After thorough risk assessment, the response may include visits by social work and police, or if deemed necessary, by the police only as the most appropriate agency. A Child Protection Order or a Child Assessment Order may be considered at any point.
- Where the child is subject to compulsory measures of care, the Reporter should be notified if agencies are unable to gain access to the child.
- In some circumstances, concern about an unseen child may escalate to the point that a child is reported missing to the police and a search is initiated. In these cases, all information must be shared with social work who will take a joint role with police in such decisions.

At all points the response should be relevant and proportionate. **If a child is at immediate risk agencies must report directly to the police.**

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