

Resistance, a complex challenge for practice

Lindsey Robb, March 2014

Key Messages

Why is it important?

Resistance is an important concept for practitioners since it is an integral and challenging aspect of work with involuntary clients.

Resistance needs to be identified and acknowledged in practice since it can impact on decision making and interventions and have negative consequences for the child.

Resistance can also have a very negative impact on staff so they need training and support to be able to articulate openly how this may be affecting them.

What is it?

Resistance is a multi-faceted concept which, in the context of child protection, can refer to parents'/carers' resistance to the offer of help, to engagement or to change.

How does it manifest?

Resistance may manifest in a variety of active and passive behaviours, attitudes and interactions ranging from reluctance or non-engagement to disguised compliance or overt hostility and violence.

Resistance can be fluid, dynamic and change very quickly so practitioners need to be constantly mindful of what it is and how it manifests in individual cases.

Why does it exist?

Resistance is complex and the reasons why it exists are numerous but range from previous negative experiences with services to being used deliberately to keep professionals at a distance.

Resistance from parents/carers can also be influenced by the practitioner who faces the challenge of building a relationship with the parent whilst at the same time remaining 'healthily sceptical'.

What might help?

Practitioners need support to consider their own contribution to the process of resistance from families including relationship dynamics and the authoritative use of power.

Practitioner/client relationships where the practitioner demonstrates empathy and listening and avoids the use of confrontation can be effective. Communication styles such as motivational interviewing are also helpful.

WithScotland research briefings provide a concise summary of the available research knowledge in which to inform practice. They are aimed at practitioners, managers, policy-makers and researchers.

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Introduction

...the involuntary nature of child protection work means that parents or carers may react negatively to any intervention.

Evidence of resistance to state intervention in child protection work is not new (Reder, Duncan and Gray 1993). However, detailed consideration of what is meant by the term resistance and how this manifests and impacts on practice, whilst previously not explicit in policy for child protection (Tuck 2013) is now emerging.

For example, the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland (2010) acknowledges 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) so an exploration of definitions and usage will be presented.

Establishing a working alliance with parents is central to child protection work (Turney 2012) yet practitioners must

balance the dual role of offering support whilst at the same time being 'respectfully uncertain' of what parents tell them (Laming 2009). Research with parents involved in the child protection process highlights that there are legitimate reasons why parents may struggle to accept help or be willing to engage (Ferguson 2005, Barter 2008, Mirick 2012, Laird 2013,) so practitioners need to understand the complexity of how and why resistance may manifest in practice.

Theoretical models are emerging that aid understanding of the concept of resistance (Yatchmenoff 2005, Mirick 2012, Platt 2012, Shemmings, Shemmings and Cook 2012, Turney 2012) and these will be considered alongside the broad range of factors which research suggests may contribute to resistance. Though no particular interventions have been robustly evaluated as effective in this area, (Fauth et al. 2010) models for intervention and the skills required which take into account the involuntary context of child protection work are also explored.



Why is this issue important?

The importance of resistance as an issue for front-line practitioners in child protection in Scotland has been acknowledged by its inclusion as a key component of the Scottish Government's 'National Risk Framework' (Calder, McKinnon and Sneddon 2012). Evidence suggests that resistance may impact on professional decision-making and use of interventions. For example, parental co-operation may lead to less coercive intervention even when there is evidence of poor parenting (Platt and Turney 2012).

Nonco-operation can lead to case closure if the threshold for statutory intervention has not been reached (Brandon et al. 2012), threats (Pearson 2009) and complaints (Laird 2013) can lead to professionals retreating, all of which leave the child potentially at risk. Resistance to intervention, engagement or change may also impact on the well-being of the child as these have associations with poor outcomes (Forrester, Westlake and Glynn 2012) including re-occurrence of abuse (Fauth et al. 2010). An understanding of how resistance may impact on practice is therefore an essential aspect of the overall risk assessment for the child (Laming 2009).

Child Protection work is complex and emotionally challenging and dealing with resistance can also have a negative impact on practitioners. Statistics suggest that actual or threats of violence are commonplace (Littlechild 2008) but are often minimised by staff who consider this as part of their role (Pearson 2009) yet such threats can paralyse thinking (Ferguson 2011), lead practitioners to avoid confrontation or contact with the family (Laird 2013), or lose their focus on the child (Brandon et al. 2012).

Evidence suggests that practitioners must be pro-active in considering the nature and incidence of resistance in each case (Darlington, Healey and Feeney 2010, Laird 2013) including being honest about fears for their own safety (Ferguson 2011). However, resistance can be misunderstood and simply labeling parents as resistant puts the blame on them (Platt and Turney 2012) when in fact it is a complex, interactional process which requires consideration from a broad psycho-social understanding of relationships in a particular context (Platt 2012).

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What does the research say?

Case studies of a small number of children illustrate how parents' use of deception and manipulation, which include concealment of injuries or refusing access to children, have resulted in serious consequences.

What is it?

The term resistance is ill defined and in the child protection context appears to be an umbrella term for either non-engagement with children's services (Yatchmenoff 2005) or for families who are difficult to work with (Shemmings, Shemmings and Cook 2012). There is an inconsistency in language used (Turney 2012) as resistance sometimes refers to intervention (Forrester, Westlake and Glynn 2012, Laird 2013) and sometimes to the process of engagement (Ferguson 2011).

At other times the term includes resistance to change (Fauth et al. 2010) and sometimes includes several or all of these aspects (Calder, McKinnon and Sneddon 2012). It is important to differentiate between these as engagement does not necessarily imply a readiness to change (Platt 2012) and determining who is capable of change is particularly challenging (Platt and Turney 2012).

How does it manifest?

Manifestations of resistance such as hostility, non-compliance and deception have been recurring themes in analyses of serious case reviews where significant harm has occurred to a child (Brandon et al. 2009, 2010, 2012). As well as this evidence from practice, a number of writers have contributed to the debate about the nature and significance of resistance suggesting that it can manifest itself in a wide range of ways at a behavioural, attitudinal or interactional level.

Parents/carers may demonstrate reluctance, avoidance, non-engagement (National Guidance 2010) or non-compliance and may respond to

professionals with threats, belligerence or become emotional (Wild 2010).

These manifestations may be an active process or may be unconscious on the part of the parents and hindered by psychological defence mechanisms such as denial (Laird 2013). Some suggest that resistance is on a continuum and may manifest differently in relation to each family member (Fauth et al. 2010). Conclusions drawn from analysis of case studies from practice are that resistance can be fluid and fast changing, and may be seen at any stage of an intervention (Brandon et al. 2009).

There is also evidence from research about the impact of resistance on children and young people, for example Brandon et al. (2012) contend that resistance in the form of aggression, threats or hostility towards practitioners should prompt reflection on what that may mean for the child in relation to parenting received. Case studies of a small number of children illustrate how parents' use of deception and manipulation, which include concealment of injuries or refusing access to children, have resulted in serious consequences (Ferguson 2011).

A common theme drawn from the literature is that disguised compliance, where parents appear to be engaging, is an area of practice that practitioners particularly lack confidence in identifying (Fauth et al. 2010). An area that will continue to pose challenges in practice when there is no foolproof method of knowing when someone is failing to tell the truth (Turney 2012). Having identified resistance it is important to consider why some parents try to keep professionals at bay.



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(Fauth et al. 2010)

Why does it exist?

Research of parents' experiences with the child protection system highlight that there are legitimate reasons why they may not engage. These include previous negative social work experience, poor service, or failing to recognize needs and provide appropriate support (Darlington, Healey and Feeney 2010, Fauth et al. 2010, Laird 2013).

Research of support offered to parents with substance misuse problems concluded that this appeared more like coercion which, to them, meant a form of surveillance (Barnard and Bain 2013). Research which included both the practitioners' and the clients' perspective of what helped or hindered engagement provided the evidence base for a model that practitioners can use to consider engagement which goes beyond looking at parental behaviours to include aspects of their inner emotions and thoughts (Yatchmenoff 2005).

Many authors also contribute to the discussion about parents' experiences of the child protection system. For example, by failing to consider the parent's perspective of what is required in their situation and what resources they have to solve this can contribute to a lack of engagement (Calder 2008). Parents, particularly mothers (Ferguson 2005), perceive that involvement with the child protection system implicitly suggests that there are issues with their parenting (Laird 2013).

In a system that many parents experience as powerful and threatening (Barter 2008) and when the stakes are high, such as potential removal of their children, responding negatively can be seen as a normal reaction (Mirick 2012). Practitioners also need to understand the lived experience of clients and be able to see their offer of support, for example in the context of domestic abuse, as restricted choices (Calder and Egan 2008).

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Evidence from research suggests that resistance can manifest when parents perceive power being used over them

Other practice challenges identified in the literature include a consideration of how culture potentially affects both help seeking behaviour of parents/ carers as well as how they may define what is meant by 'harmful' (Fauth et al. 2010). Being aware of which men are in the family and involving them in assessments also continues to be problematic (Fauth et al. 2010).

The final challenge is the need to adopt an 'eyes wide open approach' (Fauth et al. 2010) as some parents are aware that what they are doing could be deemed harmful and will therefore keep professionals from discovering this (Turner 2012).

Theories which help us understand contributory factors

Theoretical perspectives on involuntary clients, for example, critical theory which highlights the disadvantaged socio-economic position of many parents in the child protection system (Trotter 2008), may help practitioners to consider relevant issues such as power in relationships. This is one of the complex psycho-social factors which potentially underpin resistance (Forrester, Westlake & Glynn 2012).

Evidence from research suggests that resistance can manifest when parents perceive power being used over them (Dumbrill 2006) so a theoretical understanding of conflict which lies at the heart of resistance is helpful (Laing 2013). Theoretical models can also offer insights into aspects of relationship based practice (Turney 2012) including parents' own attachment history which may influence their ability to form relationships (Shemmings, Shemmings and Cook 2012).

A theoretical perspective which integrates both parents'/carers' part in the process as well as those played by professionals is essential (Platt 2012).

Models of intervention

Research into practice highlights that practitioners' behaviour can create a barrier or be used as an effective tool. Forrester, Westlake and Glynn (2012), for example, draw from social work in the area of substance misuse a model of motivational interviewing which aims to minimise resistance by increasing the way that parents talk about change, from acknowledging there is an issue to expressing and demonstrating a commitment to change.

A solution focused approach, which encourages a positive engagement from the family, is also helpful but needs balanced by a clear historical perspective of the family's history (Thoburn et al. 2009). Worker skill is important (Ferguson 2005 and 2011, Pearson 2009) to enable practitioners to make explicit how violence, intimidation and deception are impacting on service delivery, parental engagement or behavioural change. This can be done by using an authoritative, negotiated approach which honestly and openly acknowledges which factors are influencing resistance, focuses on the harm to the child and is clear about what is essential or where compromise is possible so that a plan of action with clear indications of how that will be measured can be formulated (Ferguson 2011).

Implications for practice

- Resistance is a complex, challenging and integral aspect of practice with children and families.
 - Practitioners need to actively reflect on what resistance is, why it exists and how it manifests in different cases.
 - They also need support to reflect on how they may be contributing to resistance and/or how it may be impacting on them.
 - Practitioners can utilise theoretical perspectives on involuntary clients which consider power and conflict to improve understanding of the parent's perspective and enhance relationship based practice.
 - Skills, such as communication and relationship building, are important and practitioners need opportunities to develop these.
 - Models of intervention which encourage practitioners to consider the parent's perspective, identify their strengths and which help to involve them are useful.
 - Practice utilising an authoritative negotiated approach which honestly and openly acknowledges which factors are influencing resistance, focuses on the harm to the child and formulates an action plan is suggested.
 - An "eyes wide open approach" is required so that workers are alert to the possibility that some parents are aware that what they are doing is harmful and will endeavour to hide this from professionals.
 - Supervision and support are essential for workers faced with challenges such as the impact of fear of threats, inadvertent collusion with families and risk of over optimism in particular cases.
 - Disguised compliance, being able to determine who is capable of change and involving men in assessments are particularly challenging areas of practice for practitioners who require training and supervision.
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Further resources

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