

Practice issues from Serious Case Reviews

12. Reluctance to share all information in presence of families at child protection conferences

What is the issue?

Professionals can experience the participation of families in conferences as hindering frank exchange of information

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Families and children have a right to be actively involved in decision-making about them, including through participation in child protection conferences. However, there can be a tension between professionals working collaboratively with the family and working as a professional network.

Our analysis of the SCR reports found one example in which the father in the family was very hostile, and was often challenging and argumentative during child protection conferences. As no resolution could be found to this issue, professionals involved with the family resorted to holding additional professionals' meetings, partly in order to be able to meet without the family present. The SCR author does not dispute that professionals meeting together is a good thing. However, the SCR highlights that having to convene additional meetings to 'get round' an existing process is not an ideal situation.

Why does this occur?

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The **analysis within the SCR report** highlighted that there did not seem to be an attempt to 'escalate' the issue of child protection conferences not working as they should, partly due to the hostility shown by the father. The SCR author notes:

'if [professionals'] meetings are being called to get round another process which is deemed not to be

This document is one of a set of 14 briefings intended to support managers, senior managers and practitioners by:

- identifying difficult issues in multi-agency safeguarding work, focusing on interprofessional communication and decision-making
- exploring why these issues arise, and therefore how they might be addressed.

The briefings are based on analysis of 38 Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) published between May 2014 and April 2015, augmented by information gathered from multi-agency summits in London, Leeds and Birmingham. The summits were held in September 2015 and were attended by 194 practitioners and managers from across children's social care, health, education, police, probation and Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs).

The briefings are the result of a pilot process that developed and tested new ways that SCR findings can be shared and used to support improvement.

working, it would be better to escalate the issue so that the process is put right.'

Participants at the three summits also identified a number of underlying reasons for this issue including the following:

Need to maintain an ongoing working relationship with parents

Professionals felt that a desire to protect the feelings of parents prevented honest discussion in child protection conferences. Professionals do not deliberately withhold information but struggle to be frank in front of parents and families. There is a worry that it will affect the relationship in the future. This was thought to affect some professions more than others. One participant said:

'With schools, especially rural schools, there's a greater level of family knowledge which can hinder information-sharing.' (Strategic Manager)

Many professionals felt uncomfortable sharing sensitive information in front of parents but understood the need to involve them in decision-making and planning. It was suggested that there may be a commercial aspect to presenting information, as parents may withdraw their children from services who raise safeguarding concerns (e.g. nurseries).

Lack of strategies and support for dealing with challenging behaviour

Many experiences of aggressive behaviour from parents were shared at the summits. It was felt that some less experienced professionals are intimidated by cases involving violent individuals and are at risk of being manipulated. Participants also identified that more knowledgeable parents can also be more challenging. It was made clear from summit discussions that professionals who do not regularly attend child protection conferences may not know what to expect from the process or the necessary preparation. Staff may need training and supervisory support to prepare for conferences to help build knowledge and confidence.

Lack of preparation for parents prior to meetings

There was strong agreement across all three summits that sharing information with families prior to conferences was important and that:

'If the family goes into the conference prepared then there may not be so many anxieties and tensions.' (summit attendee, job title not recorded)

It was also noted that sharing information in advance allowed any 'minor inaccuracies' to be addressed:

'A lot of complaints come from inaccuracies because the details have not been shared.' (Safeguarding Manager)

Role of the chair

Participants agreed that the chair's role is crucial in managing communication in conferences, maintaining a focus on the needs of the child and ensuring equal contribution from agencies. Participants also commented that the chair needs to be made aware if there are likely to be any challenges presented during the conference, to allow them to manage the meeting accordingly.

Solutions suggested by summit participants

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Participants at the summits suggested the following possible solutions:

- several participants thought that the Signs of Safety model helped to structure conversations in child protection conferences, and encouraged participation from across attendees
- there was also a suggestion that professionals could have a 'pre-meeting' with the chair to flag any issues; however, it was also noted that this may disempower the family.

Questions for you to consider

Unpicking the issue

1. Is this issue familiar to you?
2. Locally, is the issue exactly the same as described above? If not, what does this issue 'look like' for you?
3. What good practice is there in relation to this issue? Are there weaknesses you are aware of and how would you describe them?

Why do you think this happens in your local area?

1. Do some or all of the reasons described above apply in your area?
2. Is it an issue that has been identified in local SCRs, audits or inspection feedback? What light have these activities shed on the issue?
3. What knowledge do you have from your own experience about why this happens?
4. What organisational factors are involved locally?
5. How does local culture, custom and practice, within and between agencies, contribute to this?

Thinking through the solutions

1. Have there been previous efforts locally to address this issue? What was the result?
2. Given your understanding of the reasons for this issue, what further actions do you think would be helpful in addressing it?
3. What strengths can you build on, and what are the areas of difficulty?
4. What action would need to be taken at a strategic or leadership level?
5. Who would need to be involved to achieve improvement?
6. Are there any unintended consequences you anticipate for the different agencies and professions involved?
7. How will you know whether any actions have had an impact?

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