

Disguised Compliance (Avoidant Behaviour) Guidance

**What is Disguised Compliance?**

Disguised compliance involves parents and carers appearing to co-operate with professionals in order to allay concerns and stop professional engagement (Reder et al, 1993)1. This can mean that social workers and other practitioners may be unaware of what is happening in a child’s life and the risks they face may be unknown to local authorities. (NSPCC)

**What might Disguised Compliance look like?**

Focusing on one particular issue – parents make sure one thing goes well to deflect attention away from other areas (e.g. with Daniel Pelka, school attendance improved whilst the abuse continued).

Being critical of professionals – parents will seek to blame other professionals for things not happening, again deflecting attention away from things they have not done and seeking to split the professional group working with the family.

Failure to engage with services – parents will promise to take up services offered but then not attend appointments due to other problems.

Avoiding contact with professionals – parents will agree to certain targets and then avoid further contact with professionals.

Examples of parental behaviours which indicate disguised compliance include:

* Repeated cancelling and rescheduling of appointments
* Parents who tell workers ‘what they want to hear’, and who appear to agree about the

changes needed but who then put little actual effort into making any change

* Selective engagement - where parents do ‘just enough’ to keep professionals at bay
* Parents who manipulate situations and make it difficult for professionals to see the

child(ren) alone

* Parents insisting on prearranged visits (perhaps in order to clean the house first)
* Sporadic compliance - such as a sudden increase in school attendance, attending a run of

appointments or engaging well with some professionals for a limited period of time

* Deflecting attention - for example by criticising other workers

Controlling discussions - ensuring focus is on the parents and their problems, rather than

* the needs of the child(ren)

**How does disguised Compliance harm children?**

At the most basic level, disguised compliance harms children as it prevents professionals being

able to properly assess the risks to children in the household:

*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, 2008)*

Babies and younger children can be particularly vulnerable, and the effects of missing out on

timely safeguarding interventions can last throughout their childhood.

Disguised compliance also harms children in the following ways:

* Through missed opportunities to intervene
* By removing professional focus from children to adults in family meaning cases drift
* By making professionals feel overly optimistic about progress.

Older young people may display disguised compliance themselves, particularly in relation to

health appointments

**Tips for Practitioners **

**Begin from a place of ‘respectful uncertainty’.** This means you take what people say seriously, be they parents, young people or even colleagues, but you then look for other information to correlate or challenge the account. Where there is conflicting evidence from different professionals, the child, other students or local community, or family members, this should give you pause for thought.

**Set some short term, very achievable goals.** If the family promise a goal set between themselves and the professional, but can’t manage these, then it’s unlikely your goal of 100% attendance in three years is going to happen!

**Look carefully at the evidence.** The best predictor of the future we have is the past. Look at your chronology, think about patterns and the reasons for these. What would need to change? How many times have the family come through on what they’ve agreed to previously? Are the children’s needs being met now? Are they at risk? How long is reasonable to allow unmet needs or lower-level risks to go on? Should you be taking action now?

**Watch and learn**. Create opportunities to be with the parent and the children. What can you see? What support is needed to enable the parent and the student to achieve the goals.

Where there is disguised compliance, professionals can believe they’ve engaged positively with parents/carers to address risk/change. However, progress can drift, risks are not reduced and may actually be increased, and staff can fail to recognise significant issues of concern (domestic abuse, drug/alcohol misuse), misinterpret vital information and lose inter-agency communication.

The child therefore remains in a high risk, unprotected environment.

Be clear about your rationale with definite, measurable milestones for the student. Keep track of the pace of progress and do not be afraid to be direct about your concerns where appropriate. If there is drift, reassess the situation, record your evidence of disguised compliance and consider the need to increase the involvement of other agencies.

**Resources**

[Safeguarding Network](https://safeguarding.network/content/disguised-compliance)

[NSPCC](https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/learning-from-case-reviews/disguised-compliance)

[The Victoria Climbie Inquiry](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/273183/5730.pdf)

[National review into the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-review-into-the-murders-of-arthur-labinjo-hughes-and-star-hobson)

[West Yorkshire Procedures](https://westyorkscb.proceduresonline.com/zoom/search.php?zoom_sort=0&zoom_query=disguised+compliance&zoom_per_page=10&zoom_and=0)

[Sue Woolmore talks about disguised compliance](https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=3925eae47fe8fb5df4801bc67614b10013558f1271531f56f6f7b3687959cb46JmltdHM9MTY1Mjc4MjMwOCZpZ3VpZD1hYTg5ODNmOC03ZjMzLTQ3ODYtYWJhYy00NWFkZTgyYTA1OTgmaW5zaWQ9NTE3OQ&ptn=3&fclid=c3379a27-d5c9-11ec-a077-132a12ff6da0&u=a1aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cueW91dHViZS5jb20vd2F0Y2g_dj0xanVVMkI2Y0RfUQ&ntb=1) - Youtube

[Ruth Pearson | Working with resistant, hostile & uncooperative families](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wgQEoB9UbmY) - Youtube

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