Understanding and Overcoming Barriers to Access Support

What to say, what to ask and what to do when a family is reluctant to consent to access support

Who is this document for?

Anyone working with children and families in Essex who needs to make a referral asking for support. Families sometimes need extra help but may feel unsure, worried or resistant when a practitioner raises the subject with them.

Early Help provides children and families with the right support at the right time, helping prevent issues from escalating and reducing the need for high level intervention. This leaflet supports practitioners when a family is reluctant to engage. It explains why parents may decline support, how to build trust and develop relationships, how to work with Gillick competent young person, and what actions can still be taken if a family are reluctant to accept additional support.

Involving the family in decisions about support is the key to positive outcomes for the whole family. However if you think the child is at risk of significant harm, a referral can progress without consent.

ESSEX Safeguarding Children BOARD

When a parent says no - pause and reflect why

Refusing consent does not usually mean a parent/carer does not care or does not want help. More often it means they are frightened, overwhelmed, unclear about what is being suggested, or worried about being judged.

Parents/carers may be fearful because they:

- **Worry they will be judged as a bad parent. They may hear "support" as "you are failing", even when that is not what is meant.**
- **Do not know what happens next. Uncertainty about who information is shared with, what is recorded and what support actually looks like increases anxiety**
- **Fear social care involvement. Some parents believe accepting Early Help automatically leads to statutory intervention or children being removed.**
- **Fear a loss of control. They worry that once they agree, decisions will be made about them rather than with them.**
- **Have had previous negative experiences. Earlier involvement with schools, health, police or social care shapes how safe this conversation feels now.**
- **Feel shame, stigma or embarrassment. Discussing finances, housing, mental health, relationships, parenting, domestic abuse, SEND, attendance or behaviour can feel exposing.**
- **Feel overwhelmed already. A parent in stress or crisis may experience another professional conversation as one more thing, rather than as help.**

Treat a “no” as information, not as a full stop. The reason behind it usually tells you what the family needs from you next.

8 things that help

1. Start with building a relationship, not form, before asking for consent, spend time helping the parent feel heard.

“I can see how much you care about your child. I am not here to judge you — I am here to understand what support might make things easier.”

2. Be clear about what support is, explain it in plain language, without jargon or service names the family will not recognise.

“This is about working with you to identify what would help your family. It is not about blaming you. It is about getting help in place early, before things feel harder.”

3. Ask what they are worried about, do not assume the reason for the refusal.

“Can I ask what worries you most about agreeing to this? Has something happened before that makes this feel difficult? What would need to be different for this to feel safer for you?”

4. Use transparency to reduce anxiety, parents are far more likely to consent when they understand what support is being suggested, why it may help, who will be involved, what information will be shared, what happens next, and what choices they still have.

“Nothing should feel hidden. Let us go through exactly what would happen and who would be involved.”

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8 things that help

5. Link the support to the parent’s own goals.

Instead of “we need to make a referral”, connect the support to something the parent has already told you they want.

“You said mornings are becoming stressful and getting to school is hard. This support could help us look at what would make mornings more manageable.”

6. Use strengths-based language, avoid problem-heavy wording. Balance concerns with what is already going well.

Instead of “You need Early Help because things are not working.”
Try “There are already things you are doing well. Additional support could build on that and help reduce the pressure.”

7. Offer time, but do not let it drift, where there is no immediate safeguarding risk, a parent may need time to think. Agree a clear next step and a date to come back to it.

“You do not have to decide this second. Would it help if I left the information with you and we talked again tomorrow?”

8. Be professionally curious, If a parent continues to refuse, consider what the refusal may be telling you. Is there fear, misunderstanding, previous trauma, control or coercion, or disguised compliance?

Difficult conversations

SITUATION	TRY SAYING
Opening the conversation	*"I would like to talk with you about some support that could help, but I want to do that in a way that is helpful and transparent."*
Acknowledging fear	*"Lots of parents feel worried when support is mentioned. It does not mean you have done anything wrong."*
Explaining the purpose	*"The aim is to work with you early, so small worries do not become bigger ones."*
Checking understanding	*"Can I check what you have understood about what I am suggesting?"*
Responding to refusal	*"I respect that this feels difficult. Can we talk through what is making you feel unsure?"*
Keeping the child central	*"Let us think together about what would make things better for your child and easier for you as a family."*

When consent is not given you still have options:

- **Seek advice within your own organisations.**
- **Keep building the relationship, keep offering information, and agree when you will revisit the conversation.**
- **Sign up to Preparing for Difficult Conversations Training.**
- **Join an Early Help drop-in. Families can be discussed anonymously without consent - you can get advice, peer support and tailored Early Help signposting and suggestions.**
- **Hold a Team Around the Family (TAF) meeting - to enable all parties including family members to identify challenges & strengths to co-create an Early Help Plan.**
- **If you still need further support speak to the Children and Families consultation line 0345 603 7627.**

Record clearly

- **what was discussed, what support was offered;**
- **what the parent understood;**
- **why consent was declined; what you will do next, and whether risks are increasing.**

Reframe "they will never engage" as "they may consent at a later date". Families move through change at their own pace and holding that in mind helps to manages your own anxiety as well as theirs.

Young people: Gillick competence

Where a parent will not consent, a young person may be able to consent for themselves. Gillick competence is a set of guidelines that helps practitioners decide whether a child is mature enough to make a decision about themselves, for themselves. It is usually applied to children over the age of 13.

CONSIDER

- **the child's age, mental capacity and maturity;**
- **their understanding of the issue and what it involves;**
- **the risks and consequences of the decision, and the alternative options;**
- **how well they understand the information and advice they have been given;**
- **their ability to explain the reasoning behind their decision.**

Satisfy yourself that the young person is not acting under duress or pressure or being influenced by someone else.

IF THE YOUNG PERSON IS GILLICK COMPETENT

Where a child is under age of 16 years it is always advisable to work within parental consent. However, on the rare occasion where a parent doesn't consent but the young person is Gillick competent and has expressed a wish for support, work to meet the best interest of the child and consider supporting them to complete a self referral. Consideration should be made for any increase in risk to the young person

IMPORTANT

Where there are safeguarding issues, all agencies are required to inform the parent, if a child may be at risk of significant harm. Unless doing so places the child at an increased risk of significant harm.

Follow your safeguarding procedures immediately and make sure you are requesting the correct level of support.
Effective Support for Children and Families in Essex

For immediate safeguarding concerns — ask for the priority line
0345 603 7627
Out of hours — Emergency Duty Team 0345 606 1212

Further Resources, Practice Tools and Training

Essex Safeguarding Children Board
Safeguarding procedures, resources, practice tools, learning from reviews and training.

Early Help drop ins
Open to professionals across Essex working with children and families. Discuss anonymised cases, get peer support, be signposted to advice and ask general questions.

Let's Talk supporting engagement tool - Essex County Council

Children and Families Hub Video - The Hub is the front door to Children's Social Care and Family Solutions. The short video is a useful way to show a family what the Hub does and what happens with referrals.
ESCB - Concerns about the welfare of a child

Early Help and Effective Support Resources
The Essex framework for the right support at the right time, including the windscreen of need. escb.co.uk › early-help-and-effective-support

Preparing for Difficult Conversations workshop
For those working at levels 1 and 2 of the windscreen of need and supporting families with Early Help. Builds confidence in preparing for and holding challenging conversations, using cycles of change theory, motivational interviewing and covers why some families struggle to engage, and when the right time to approach and reapproach them may be.

ESCB learning and development opportunities for those Working with Children and young people.
Learning and Development - ESCB

Information Sharing Duty - GOV.UK