

Professional Curiosity - See Past the Obvious

Practitioner Briefing



Welcome to this briefing to help practitioners and their managers understand Professional Curiosity. The messages in this Briefing are just as important for those working in adult services (where service users could be parents or carers).

Children and young people affected by abuse or neglect rarely tell us so directly and often they don't realise that their lives are different to anyone else's. Practitioners need to be curious about their lives, observant of their behaviour and to really listen to what they are saying. **What do we mean by 'professional curiosity'?** Looking, listening, asking direct questions, checking out and reflecting on information received. It means not taking a single source of information and accepting it at face value. It means practitioners testing out their assumptions about different types of families. It means triangulating information from different sources to gain a better understanding of family functioning which, in turn, helps to make predictions about what is likely to happen in the future. It means seeing past the obvious. In order to be truly curious about a child's life practitioners also need to maintain an attitude of **respectful uncertainty**. Does the explanation given make sense? Is there other information which sheds doubt on their account? Is it possible to independently verify the information given? It is important to acknowledge that we all work in an environment of uncertainty. Nobody can see into the future or know what happens behind closed doors and therefore practitioners need to adjust their understanding of the child's situation in order to take into account changing information and different perspectives. Practitioners also need to be aware that we all carry a level of unconscious bias and that our own culture and background impact on the way we interpret family life. Cultural competence seeks to understand family dynamics and lifestyles in a holistic manner and avoids over-simplifying the impact of culture. An example of common over-simplification would be assuming that it is always best to allocate a family to a worker from the same country or community, when for some this could increase the sense of stigma and make it more difficult for families to be open and honest.

How to be curious;

- Explain at the first visit that you may have to **ask personal or sensitive questions** and **ask them in an open and relaxed manner**. Explain that the intention is not to interrogate but to understand the family.
- **Never disregard information** because it does not fit with your understanding, be open to the unexpected and willing to change your opinion. Remain **open minded** and expect the unexpected.
- **Question your own assumptions** about how families function and guard against **over optimism**
- Beware of **inconsistent explanations, vague or retracted disclosures**. Appreciate that **respectful scepticism and challenge** are healthy – it is ok to question what you are told
- Do not discount concerns just because they are unproven – **concerns may be both valid and impossible to substantiate**
- Explanations from the family need to be collated with observation and other sources of information - **is the overall picture consistent?**
- **Home visits should include seeing the whole home**, especially where the child sleeps, bathes, eats, etc.
- **Think family** – who else has an important role in the child's life? Are they also vulnerable?
- Case reviews repeatedly find that had all of the **information held by different agencies been collated it would have led to a much clearer picture of the risk to the child**.
- Recognise how your **own feelings** (for example tiredness, feeling rushed or illness) might impact on your view of a child or family on a given day
- Demonstrate a willingness to have **less than 'comfortable' interactions with families** when this is necessary. Address any professional anxiety about how **hostile or resistant families** might react to being asked direct or difficult questions
- Ensure you are able to recognise **disguised compliance** and understand the impact of **coercive control** on the behaviour and responses of family members
- Understand the cumulative impact on children of **multiple or combined risk factors**, e.g. adverse childhood experiences, etc.
- Ensure that your **practice is reflective** and that you have access to **good quality supervision**

Is this a new approach and will it mean extra work for me? Not if you are already doing your job well. But if you apply a 'tick box' approach to completing assessments or conducting consultations with children and families then it will require you to take more time to be curious and ask questions, and to check out what you are told with other family members and other practitioners

Why is it important in working with children and their families? Learning from case reviews, both nationally and locally, is that responding to presenting issues in isolation and a lack of professional curiosity can lead to missed opportunities to identify less obvious indicators of vulnerability or significant harm, and we know that in the worst circumstances this has resulted in death or serious abuse.

Is exercising professional curiosity easy and straight forward? Not always. Especially with those parents who demonstrate disguised compliance or coercive control. Families can appear to be engaging with professionals but are not able or willing to change as a result of an intervention. Or certain family members are unable through fear to be open and honest about the family dynamics. It is with these families that practitioners need to exercise most curiosity.

Looking

- Is there anything about what I am seeing in my interaction with this child or family which prompts questions or makes me feel uneasy or concerned?
- Am I observing behaviour which is indicative of abuse or neglect?
- Does what I am seeing support or contradict what I am being told?

Listening

- Am I being told anything which requires further clarification?
- Am I concerned about what I am hearing family members saying to each other?
- Is someone in this family trying to tell me something but finding it difficult to express help them to do so?

Asking

- Are there direct questions which I could ask in my direct contact with this family which will provide more information about the vulnerability of individual family members?

Checking out

- Do I know what other practitioners are involved with this family?
- Have other practitioners observed what I have seen?
- Are practitioners being told the same or different things, or do explanations from family members change over time or according to who you ask?

In order to effectively apply the principles of professional curiosity it is crucial that practitioners maintain an open mind, this includes being willing to think the unthinkable. People who abuse children do not fit any particular profile. They are not always aggressive and obstructive, may be charismatic, well-educated and sociable. It is natural for a practitioner to want to believe the best of a family, and thinking the unthinkable does not mean assuming the worst. It means keeping an open mind, and being able to think objectively about the evidence presented.

Please access the [Pan Bedfordshire Child Protection Procedures](#) and register for updates.

