

What is professional curiosity?

It is important that all professionals working with children and families exercise professional curiosity. Professional curiosity is where a practitioner explores and pro-actively tries to understand what is happening within a family or for an individual, rather than making assumptions or taking a single source of information and accepting it at face value.

Professional curiosity consists of listening, asking direct questions, checking out and reflecting on all of the information received. Being professionally curious does not mean that a practitioner is not working in a relational way, it is more about being able to challenge parents and carers in order to understand a child's vulnerability or risk while maintaining an objective, professional and supportive approach.

Many Safeguarding Practice Reviews and audits refer to a lack of professional curiosity or respectful uncertainty. Nurturing professional curiosity and challenge are fundamental aspects of working together to keep children, young people, and adults safe.

Why is it important?

A lack of professional curiosity can lead to missed opportunities to identify less obvious indicators of vulnerability or significant harm. We know that in the worst circumstances this has resulted in death or serious abuse as confirmed by the learning from case reviews, both nationally and locally, where practitioners have responded to presenting issues in isolation.

Professional curiosity or respectful uncertainty is needed when working with families who are superficially cooperating, sporadic engagement or displaying coercive control. Families can appear engage but may not be able or willing to change despite the intervention. Certain family members may be unable through fear to be open and honest about the family dynamics.



One Minute Guide

Professional Curiosity

July 2024



Professional curiosity from afar...

On the phone practitioners can ask if a child or family member can speak freely or if there are other members of the family in the room. From there they can ask whether they can move to another room or agree another time to talk where they can speak openly.

On video calls practitioners should consider if they are seeing anything that prompts questions or raises concerns. This could be in the form of body language, observed behaviour indicating abuse or neglect or something in background of the call. Professionals should question whether what they are seeing supports or contradicts what they are being told.

Reflective practice and regular supervision are ways to support professional curiosity and support professionals to implement a non-judgemental and holistic approach.

How to be professionally curious

→ Understand the child and family's daily life

Question what the daily lived experience is for a child and consider any risks, challenges and cumulative impacts that may be present for them e.g., domestic abuse, parental drug/alcohol misuse, parental mental health.

→ Think Family

Enquire about the significant people in families' lives that influence them, including fathers & males. Understand the impact of coercive control on the behaviour and responses of family members.

→ Triangulate Information

Learning from Safeguarding Practice Reviews repeatedly find that had all the information held by different agencies been collated it would have led to a much clearer picture of the risk to the child.

→ Be brave

Address any professional anxiety about how families might react to being asked direct or difficult questions. Do not be afraid to ask questions of families and do so in an open way so they know that you are asking to keep the child safe, not to judge or criticise.

→ Think outside the box and outside of your immediate job role

Professional curiosity can require practitioners to think 'outside the box', beyond their usual professional role, considering families' circumstances holistically.

→ Remain open minded and expect the unexpected

Appreciate that respectful scepticism and challenge are healthy – it is ok to question what you are told. Question your own assumptions about how family's function and guard against over optimism.

Be aware of how your own background, culture, and beliefs impact on the way you interpret a situation. 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.

Barriers to curiosity

- × Over-optimism
- × Making assumptions
- × Complexity and pressure of work
- × Lacking the confidence or assertiveness to ask sensitive questions or manage tension
- × Disagreement, disruption and aggression from families or others can undermine confidence
- × Unconscious bias
- × Professional deference, deferring to the opinion of a 'higher status' professional who has limited contact with the person but who views the risk as less significant.
- × Confirmation bias, looking for evidence that supports or confirms a pre-held view, and ignoring contrary information that refutes it.

Dealing with uncertainty when presented with concerns which are impossible to substantiate. 'Unsubstantiated' concerns and inconclusive medical evidence should not lead to case closure without further assessment and retracted allegations still need to be investigated wherever possible. The use of risk assessment tools can reduce uncertainty, but they are not a substitute for professional judgement.

Key Contacts and Further Information

- Voice of the child: <https://westmids-coventry.trixonline.co.uk/chapter/supporting-the-voice-of-the-child>
- [Coventry Safeguarding Children Partnership](#)
- [Family F One Minute Guide](#)
- [Escalation policy: Resolution of professional disagreements](#)
- [Difficult Conversations with Children One Minute Guide](#)

Lack of professional curiosity is a key theme and area for development in local and national safeguarding practice review!