

What is Professional Curiosity

Professional Curiosity, also referred to as respectful uncertainty, is a combination of looking, listening, asking direct questions, checking out and reflecting on ALL the information you receive, rather than making assumptions or taking information at face value.

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 does it matter?

Children experiencing abuse and neglect often do not disclose it directly to practitioners and, if they do, it will sometimes be through their behaviour or comments. This makes identifying abuse and neglect difficult for professionals across agencies. Professional curiosity is the first step in gaining a clearer insight into what is going on in a young person's life.

It enables practitioners to have a holistic view and understanding of what is happening within a family, what life is like for a child or young person and fully assess potential risks.

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 or displaying coercive control. Families can appear engaged 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

March 2022

Professional curiosity from afar

Since the start of the pandemic, practitioners may have been working differently with children, young people and families, and in some instances, this will include connecting with people via phone or video call. This has restricted practitioner's abilities to pick up visual clues and they may need to think of more creative ways to exercise their professional curiosity.

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 the background of the call. Professionals should question whether what they are seeing supports or contradicts what they are being told.

Supervision

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

- Play 'devil's advocate'.
- Present alternative hypotheses about what could be happening.
- Present cases from the perspective of other family members or professionals.
- Ask practitioners what led them to arrive at their conclusion and support them to think through the evidence.
- Question whether outcomes have improved for the person and evidence for this.
- Provide opportunities for group supervision which can help stimulate debate and curious questioning, and allow practitioners to learn from one another's experiences. A 'fresh pair of eyes' looking at a case can help practitioners and organisations to maintain a clear focus on good practice and risk assessment and develop a critical mindset.
- Monitor workloads and encourage practitioners to talk about and support them to address issues of stress or pressure. Support practitioners to recognise when they are tired and need a fresh pair of eyes on a case.

How to be professionally curious

Understand the child and family's daily life

As part of any consultation, carefully go through daily routines and where services are being accessed/can be accessed to assist the vulnerable child.

Do not presume you know what is happening in the family home – ask questions and seek clarity if you are not certain. Home visits should include seeing the whole home where possible, especially where the child sleeps.

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

Professionals need to enquire about the significant people in families' lives that influence them. Understand the impact of coercive control on the behaviour and responses of family members.

Triangulate Information

Professionals need to have a degree of caution in their judgements and triangulate information. Seek independent confirmation of individuals' accounts and weigh up details from a range of sources, particularly when there appear to be discrepancies.

Serious case 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.

Incorporate information that does not support your initial assumptions into your assessment of what life is like for the child or adult in the family.

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 and divert meetings away from topics the practitioner wants to explore and back to the family's own agenda.

Unconscious bias

Normalising ideas and actions that then cease to be questioned and are therefore not recognised as potential risks or assessed as such.

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

- [Coventry Safeguarding Children Partnership](#)
- [Family F One Minute Guide](#)
- [Escalation policy: Resolution of professional disagreements](#)
- [Difficult Conversations with Children One Minute Guide](#)
- [Encouraging Families One Minute Guide](#)