

Professional Curiosity

Children and young people affected by abuse or neglect rarely tell us so directly – they may be frightened or ashamed, and often they don't realise that their lives are different to anyone else's. This makes it difficult for professionals to identify children who are experiencing or at risk of abuse – to do so we need to be curious about their lives, observant of their behaviour and to really listen to what they are saying to us.

Professional curiosity means exploring every possible indicator of abuse or neglect and trying to understand what the life of that child is like on a day to day basis – their routines, thoughts, feelings and relationships with family members. A professional may have the opportunity to identify abuse and neglect even if they come into contact with a family for an unrelated reason.

In order to be truly curious about a child's life professionals also need to maintain an attitude of **respectful uncertainty**. This means applying a critical eye to the information given by a child's carers rather than just accepting things on face value. 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.

GSCB audit findings

The GSCB conduct thematic audits to learn about multi-agency practice in key areas of focus. Below are some examples of places where greater curiosity is warranted.

- The role of Fathers and other significant men: there is a lack of understanding of the role that male figures play in many children's lives. It is common to read the line "Father is supportive" on assessment forms with no real explanation of what that means for the child on a daily basis.
- Considering the impact on siblings, particularly in cases where there are concerns about the exploitation of children.
- Routine enquiry about familial relationships – many services are only exploring if there are clear indicators or allegations of DV rather than thinking about the impact of relationships in a more holistic manner.

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.

Barriers to curiosity

1. Losing focus on the child through over-identifying with carers
2. Over-optimism
3. Making assumptions
4. Being afraid to raise concerns / question families
5. Time constraints (e.g. due to workload)
6. Lacking the confidence or assertiveness to ask sensitive questions
7. Unconscious bias

How to be curious

1. Explain at the first visit that you may have to ask personal or sensitive questions
2. Never disregard information because it does not fit with your understanding – be open to the unexpected and willing to change your opinion
3. Do not make presumptions about what is happening in a family home
4. Ask questions in an open and relaxed manner – explain that the intention is not to interrogate but to understand
5. Beware of inconsistent explanations, vague or retracted disclosures
6. Do not discount concerns just because they are unproven – concerns may be both valid and impossible to substantiate
7. Explanations from the family need to be collated with observation and other sources of information – is the overall picture consistent?
8. Home visits should include seeing the whole home, especially where the child sleeps
9. Think family – who else has an important role in the child's life? Are they also vulnerable?
10. Seek consent to speak to the professional network– serious 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
11. Be aware of how your own background, culture and beliefs impact on the way you interpret a situation
12. Seek a second opinion – talk any doubts through with an appropriate colleague, i.e. (depending on your role) your designated safeguarding lead, in peer or line supervision or via the MASH consultation line (020 8921 2267)

It is important to ask ourselves whether any of these barriers may be impacting on our ability to be curious – if in doubt speak to your manager or safeguarding lead.