

What is Professional Curiosity?

Professional curiosity is the capacity (and communication skill) a practitioner uses to explore and proactively try 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.

Being professionally curious enables practitioners to critically evaluate (with an open mind) information shared with them in order to understand their member's, or another's (i.e., a child or young person's), vulnerability to abuse, neglect or psychosocial risk, while maintaining an objective, professional and supportive stance.

Professional curiosity is a recurring theme within safeguarding reviews, highlighting the need for us to fully understand an individual's concerns within their broader family and social context. This curious stance enables practitioners to have a holistic view and understanding of what is happening within a family, what life is like for an individual, and use this information to fully assess potential risks.

Poor supervision

Complexity and pressure of work,

Changes of case worker leading to **repeatedly 'starting again'** Closing cases too quickly or without clearly documented transfers of care. This is something our safeguarding lead, Louise Egan, reflected on in her [July 2023 Safeguarding Briefing](#).

Fixed thinking, preconceived ideas and values, and a lack of openness to new knowledge are also barriers to a professionally curious approach.

Other Barriers

'Knowing but Not Knowing' is about having a sense that something is not right, but not knowing exactly what? Issues can become difficult to grasp and take action around.

Confidence in Managing Tension: When faced with disagreement, disruption and aggression from families, or others, our confidence can be knocked. This might cause us to divert meetings away from topics that we, the practitioner, would like to explore.

Dealing with Uncertainty: Contested accounts, vague or retracted disclosures, deception and inconclusive medical evidence are common in safeguarding practice. Practitioners are often presented with concerns which are impossible to substantiate. In these situations, '...there is a temptation to discount concerns that cannot be proved'.

The issues mentioned here are just a few important concepts relevant to the issue of **'professional dangerousness'**. This is a concept coined by **Tony Morrison** to describe '...the process whereby professionals involved in Child Protection work can behave in a way which either colludes with or increases the dangerous dynamics of the abusing family.' It has wider implications to the topic of individual and family safeguarding practice.

What does Professional Curiosity look like in practice?

Professional curiosity relies on our senses, clinical judgment and confidence seeking and reflecting on information gathered from multiple sources. **It requires us to:**

- **Test out assumptions** held about different individuals and their families, by having our own assumptions, views and interpretations challenged, and challenging others.
- **Consider 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.
- **Seek clarity**, either from the family or other professionals.
- See past the obvious, question what is observed, and **not take things at 'face value'**.
- **Be open to the unexpected**, and incorporate information that does not support our initial assumptions into our assessment of what life is like for an individual, and/or their family. **Think the unthinkable; believe the unbelievable.**
 - Use our communication skills: review records, record accurately, check facts
 - and feedback to the people we are working with/for.
- Use case history and explore from the person themselves, and from the perspective of their family, friends, neighbours and other professionals.
- Pay attention to how people look and behave and speak.
- Take responsibility for the safeguarding role you play, however large or small

Consider information from different sources (we only know what we know, please consult appropriate professionals, ideally with consent, to gain a holistic picture to best inform decision making). Working jointly in partnership with other professionals can sometimes help minimise the consequences of safeguarding referrals.

Barriers to Professional Curiosity

It is important that when a lack of professional curiosity is cited as a factor in a tragic incident, this does not mean that blame should be apportioned. It is widely recognised that there are many barriers to being professionally curious. Some of the barriers to professionally curious practice are set out below:

Disguised Compliance: When an individual, family member or carer gives the appearance of co-operating with inquires in order to avoid raising suspicions, to allay professionals concerns and ultimately to reduce involvement.

The **Safeguarding Network** says this commonly manifests as: focusing on one particular issue over other; criticism of professionals; difficulty being engaged by services; and avoiding contact with them.

The **'Rule of Optimism'** is a well-known dynamic in which professionals can tend to rationalise away new or escalating risks despite clear evidence to the contrary.

Normalisation: The social processes through which ideas or actions are seen as 'normal' and are 'taken-for-granted' and, therefore, cease to be questioned.

Professional Deference: Where workers who have most contact are in a good position to recognise when the risks are escalating. However there is a tendency to defer to the opinion of a 'higher status' professional who has limited contact

Confirmation Bias: When you look for evidence that supports or confirms your pre-held view and ignores contrary information that refutes them.

Professional Curiosity

How to be, and to be supported in being, professionally curious?

Use **supervision**, and **consultation**, as an opportunity to explore cases and exercise professional curiosity, for example by:

- Playing **'devil's advocate'**, asking **'what if?'** questions to challenge and support.
- Present **alternative hypotheses** about what could be happening.
- Seek opportunities for **group supervision** to stimulate debate and curious questioning.
- **Present cases from multiple perspectives** (i.e., from the member's, other family member's or professional's perspectives).
- Ask practitioners what led them to arrive at their conclusion and support them to **think through their evidence**.
- Monitor workloads and **encourage practitioners to talk** and support them to navigate issues of stress and pressure. Support them to **recognise the need for a fresh pair of eyes on a case**.