

Professional Curiosity Guidance for Practitioners



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Introduction

Nurturing professional curiosity and challenge are a fundamental aspect of working together to keep children, young people and adults safe from harm.

Professional curiosity is an emerging theme in the SARs (Safeguarding Adult Reviews) SPR's (Safeguarding Practice Reviews), Domestic Homicides (DHRs) and other reviews completed in Cumbria, and this finding is reflected nationally. Although it has long been recognised as an important concept in safeguarding children practice it is equally relevant to work with adults.

This guidance raises awareness of the need for professional curiosity or respectful uncertainty as it is sometimes called, it is designed to help practitioners spot the signs of when a parent or carer may be using disguised compliance; and advise where and how to access help and services.

What is Professional Curiosity?

Professional Curiosity is the capacity and skills of communication to explore and understand what is happening for a person, rather than making assumptions or accepting things at face value. It requires skills of looking listening, asking direct questions and being able to hold difficult conversations. Professional Curiosity and challenge are a fundamental aspect of working together to keep adults and children safe from harm.

This has been described as the need for practitioners to practice 'respectful uncertainty' – applying critical evaluation to any information they receive and maintaining an open mind. In safeguarding the term 'safe uncertainty' is used to describe an approach which is focused on safety but that takes into account changing information, different perspectives and acknowledges that certainty may not be achievable. This approach is important in helping to identify abuse and neglect which can be less obvious and can ensure that the right information is gathered and shared to assess both needs and risks.

Being professionally curious is necessary to fully understand a situation and the risks an individual may face, which are not always immediately obvious. Being more curious as professionals and 'digging deeper' into areas where there is little, or no information will help to inform assessments and empower you to influence key moments of decision making to reduce risks for children and adults. Escalating concerns that could cause drift, delay and a shift in focus from the child's or adults' best interests should be embraced and seen as effective care.

How does it safeguard people?

Abuse and neglect are rarely disclosed directly to practitioners. Working with people in a professionally curious way enables managers and practitioners to better identify and respond to the signs and indicators of abuse and neglect. A lack of professional curiosity is an emerging and recurrent theme in both Safeguarding Adult Review and Serious Case/Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review findings.

Why do we need to be curious in safeguarding?

- To understand the full picture
- To ensure that nothing is missed

- To improve practice outcomes
- To do our best to safeguard children and adults
- To identify disguised compliance
- To support other professionals working with the family

Why do we need Professional Curiosity?

In Cumbria we believe Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility and where practitioners are concerned each and every agency has a role to play in safeguarding.

The following factors highlight the need to improve professional curiosity and professional courage:

- the views and feelings of vulnerable adults, children and young people can be difficult to ascertain
- practitioners do not always listen to adults who tried to speak on behalf of another person and who may have important information to contribute
- parents or carers can easily prevent practitioners from seeing and listening to a child or another adult
- practitioners can be fooled with stories we want to believe are true
- effective multi-agency work needs to be coordinated
- the importance of triangulation of information
- challenging parents or carers (and colleagues) requires expertise, confidence, time and a considerable amount of emotional energy.

Practising Professional Curiosity

Professional curiosity can require practitioners to:

- think 'outside the box', beyond their usual professional role, and consider families' circumstances holistically
- show a real willingness to engage with children, young people and their families or carers to understand lived experiences.

Much has been written about the importance of curiosity during home visits in our work and the need for authentic, close relationships of the kind where we see, hear and touch the truth of their experience of 'daily life', and are able to act on it and to achieve similar closeness with parents or carers.

Practitioners will often come into contact with a child, young person, adult or their family when they are in crisis or vulnerable to harm. These interactions present crucial opportunities for protection. Responding to these opportunities requires the ability to recognise (or see the signs of) vulnerabilities and potential or actual risks of harm, maintaining an open stance of professional curiosity (or enquiring deeper), and understanding one's own responsibility and knowing how to take action.

Children and young people rarely disclose information about abuse and neglect directly to practitioners. If they do, it will often be through unusual behaviour or comments. This makes identifying abuse and neglect difficult for professionals across agencies. We know that it is

better to help as early as possible, before issues get worse. This requires all agencies and practitioners to work together – the first step is to be professionally curious.

Look

- Is there anything about what you see when you meet the adult, child/their family that makes you feel uneasy or prompts questions?
- Do you see behaviours which indicate abuse or neglect including coercion and control?
- Does what you see contradict or support what you are being told?
- How do family members/ other people in the household interact with each other and with you?

Ask

- Curious professionals will spend time engaging with families on visits. They will know that talk, play and touch can all be important to observe and consider.
- Do not presume you know what is happening in the family home – ask questions and seek clarity if you are not certain.
- Do not be afraid to ask questions of families, or the persons network, and do so in an open way so they know that you are asking to keep their child or adult safe, not to judge or criticise.
- Be open to the unexpected and 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.

Listen

- Are you being told anything that needs further clarification?
- Is the adult, child or someone else in the family/household trying to tell you something verbally or by their non-verbal cues?
- Are you concerned about how family members interact and what they say?
- Making time and finding a safe space to have a private conversation with an adult or child at risk or, who is subject to coercion and control can support open conversations.
- Children in particular, rarely disclose abuse and neglect directly to practitioners and, if they do, it will often be through unusual behaviour or comments. This makes identifying abuse and neglect difficult for professionals across agencies. We know that it is better to help as early as possible, before issues get worse. That means that all agencies and practitioners need to work together – the first step is to be professionally curious.

Clarify

- Are there other professionals involved? What information do they have, is it useful to arrange a multi-disciplinary discussion?
- Are other professionals being told the same or different things?
- Are others concerned?
- If so what action has been taken so far and is there anything else which could or should be done by you or someone else to support the adult or child?

Practice Tips

- Share information in a timely fashion

- When assessing and managing a case, input from a number of sources is better than one
- Sometimes the most important relationship to trust is yourself – if you feel there is a risk that is not being managed, and no one is hearing you, what do you do, how do you escalate this?
- Try to be flexible with meetings to fit around all involved practitioner's availability
- Don't use jargon, talk to colleagues and families using language they understand and relate to
- Include families in decisions about their own lives
- Be mindful of personal optimistic (wishful thinking), cultural or bias when reviewing the families' progress
- Make sure care plans are multi-agency and have SMART outcomes
- Self-assessments tools can promote honest discussion
- Team managers should attend training for providing effective supervision and reflective practice in managing safeguarding
- Use quality assurance and audit framework such as quality standards to review case records to support good practice that keeps children safe and aids staff continuous professional development (CPD).

Information sharing

- Fears about jeopardising the relationship with the family should not be a barrier to the sharing of information
- Principles from the Cumbria Safeguarding Adults Board and the Cumbria Safeguarding Children Partnership Information Sharing policy and guidance should be followed
- Information should be shared in a timely manner and the family or persons network, included where it does not increase risk
- All involved agencies should be given ample notice when invited to case review meetings, this will enable agencies to provide reports and feedback to contribute to ongoing assessment, and review of family progress
- Practitioners should maintain contact with each other, and make the times of meetings flexible to enable optimal attendance.

Professional Curiosity & Culturally Competent Safeguarding Practice

Black and Minority Ethnic, or Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BME/BAME) is the terminology normally used in the UK to describe people of non-white descent (according to the website www.irr.org.uk).

There is evidence that culturally competent safeguarding practice enhances children and young people's well-being. Professionals who have an understanding of how variations in child rearing and caring practices within BAME families could contribute to prevention and early intervention.

Interventions have the potential to be as a result of stereotyping, lack of awareness among practitioners of how various categories of abuse are manifested in BAME communities, coupled with a general lack of awareness of cultural practices.

It is important therefore to ensure practitioners are sensitive to differing family patterns and lifestyles that vary across different racial, ethnic and cultural groups. At the same time, they must be clear that child or adult abuse cannot be condoned for religious or cultural reasons.

All practitioners working with children, young people, their parents, carers or families whose faith, culture, nationality and possibly recent history differs significantly from that of the majority culture, must be professionally curious and take personal responsibility for informing their work with sufficient knowledge (or seeking advice) on the particular culture and/or faith by which the child, young person, adult and their family or carers lives their daily life.

Practitioners should be curious about situations or information arising in the course of their work, allowing the family to give their account, as well as researching such things by discussion with other practitioners, or by researching the evidence base. Examples of this might be around attitudes towards, and acceptance of, services e.g., health; dietary choices; education provision or school attendance.

In some instances, reluctance to access support stems from a desire to keep family life private. In many communities there is a prevalent fear that social work practitioners will 'take your children away'. There may be a poor view of support services arising from initial contact through the immigration system, and, for some communities – particularly those with insecure immigration status – an instinctive distrust of the state arising from experiences in their country of origin.

Practitioners must take personal responsibility for utilising specialist services' knowledge. Knowing about and using services available locally to provide relevant cultural and faith-related input to prevention, support and rehabilitation services for the child, young people and their families will support practice.

This includes:

- Knowing which agencies are available to access
- Having contact details to hand
- Timely requests for expert support and information, to ensure that assessments, care planning and review are comprehensive and holistic.

Often for BAME communities, accessing appropriate services is a consistent barrier to them fully participating in society, increasing their exclusion and potential for victimisation.

The Safeguarding Lead in your agency should be able to signpost you to appropriate support available within your organisation.

What is disguised compliance?

Professional curiosity or respectful uncertainty is needed when working with families who are displaying disguised compliance. Disguised compliance involves parents or carers giving the appearance of co-operating with agencies to avoid raising suspicions and allay concerns.

There is a continuum of behaviours from parents or carers on a sliding scale, with full co-operation at end of the scale, and planned and effective resistance at the other. Showing your best side or 'saving face' may be viewed as 'normal' behaviour and therefore we can expect a degree of disguised compliance in all families; but at its worst superficial cooperation may be to conceal deliberate abuse. Many case reviews highlight that professionals can sometimes

delay or avoid interventions due to parental disguised compliance. More information about disguised compliance and current policy can be found in the CSCP policy manual [here](#)

Professional Challenge

Differences of opinion, concerns and issues can arise for practitioners at work and it is important they are resolved as effectively and swiftly as possible.

Having different professional perspectives within safeguarding practice is a sign of a healthy and well-functioning partnership. These differences of opinion are usually resolved by discussion and negotiation between the practitioners concerned. It is essential that where differences of opinion arise they do not adversely affect the outcomes for children, young people or their families, adults and their networks, are resolved in a constructive and timely manner.

Differences could arise in a number of areas of multi-agency working as well as within single agency working. Differences are most likely to arise in relation to:

- Criteria for referrals
- Outcomes of assessments
- Roles and responsibilities of workers
- Service provision
- Timeliness of interventions
- Information sharing and communication.

If you have difference of opinion with another practitioner, remember

- Professional differences and disagreements can help us find better ways improve outcomes for children, young people and families
- All professionals are responsible for their own cases and their actions in relation to case work
- Differences and disagreements should be resolved as simply and quickly as possible, in the first instance by individual practitioners and /or their line managers
- All practitioners should respect the views of others whatever the level of experience – remember that challenging more senior or experienced practitioners can be hard
- Expect to be challenged; working together effectively depends on an open approach and honest relationships between agencies

Professional differences are reduced by clarity about roles and responsibilities and the ability to discuss and share problems in networking forums.

More information about escalation and current policy can be found in the [CSCP policy manual](#). If you work with Adults, you can access [CSAB's Escalation Guidance](#).

How Organisations and Managers can support Professional Curiosity

Be aware of systems, processes and practices that could contribute to 'organisational avoidance or ignorance' and so impede professional curiosity. Often services may be reluctant to get involved with an individual or family, or may inadvertently create systems and processes which can discourage professional curiosity in practice. This can be for a variety of reasons, such as due to workloads, service boundaries or restrictive processes which have the intention of resolving one issue but may then have an impact on professional curiosity and good multi-

agency practice. This minimises chances of really exploring and hearing the voice of the person and their family.

Ensure professionally curious management and supervision (model and encourage reflective practice and support practitioner and organisational development)

Avoid working in organisational silos and encourage creative multi-agency working.

Supervision, Curiosity and Understanding Families

For many agencies, the use of effective supervision is a method of improving decision-making, accountability, and supporting professional development among practitioners. Supervision is also an opportunity to question and explore an understanding of a case.

Group supervision and Reflective Practice Groups can be even more effective in promoting curiosity and safe uncertainty, as practitioners can use these spaces to think about their own judgments and observations. It also allows teams to learn from one another's experiences, and the issues considered in one case may have echoes in other workloads.

Domestic Violence & Abuse and Professional Curiosity

Many reviews refer to a lack of professional curiosity or respectful uncertainty. Practitioners need to demonstrate a non-discriminatory approach and explore the issues to formulate judgments that translate into effective actions in their dealings with families. In particular it is vital that professionals understand the complexity of domestic abuse and are curious about what is happening within the household. Professional curiosity is much more likely to flourish when practitioners

- Are supported by good quality training to help them develop
- Have access to good management, support and supervision
- 'Walk in the shoes' (have empathy) of the child and/or adult to consider the situation from their lived experience
- Remain diligent in working with the family and developing the professional relationships to understand what has happened, and its impact on all family members
- Always try to see all parties separately.

Working with families where there is domestic abuse can be very challenging, practitioners should not take everything they are told at face value. This is particularly so when a victim is not being seen alone, we should also be alert to the following behaviours which should provoke our professional curiosity

- The victim waits for her/his partner to speak first
- The victim glances at her/his partner each time they speak, checking her/his reaction
- The victim smooths over any conflict
- The suspected perpetrator speaks for most of the time
- The suspected perpetrator sends clear signals to the victim, by eye/body movement, facial expression or verbally, to warn them
- The suspected perpetrator has a range of complaints about the victim, which they do not defend.

If these signals are present, the practitioner should find a way of seeing the suspected victim alone. Practitioners must be mindful to the needs of children and young people who may be

experiencing inequality and/or violence in their relationships, this will include considering the child as a potential victim of domestic abuse and/or as a potential victim of neglect due to the domestic abuse. Practitioners, however curious, cannot protect children, young people and vulnerable adults by working in isolation. Domestic abuse requires a multi-agency response, and families and communities also have a vital role to play in protecting children and young people.

Acknowledgments

The information in this guide is not exhaustive and it should be used as a reference tool alongside practitioners own safeguarding practices and in conjunction with appropriate supervision.

This guidance was developed and adapted from the Norfolk Safeguarding Adults Board and the Manchester Safeguarding Children Partnership guidance.

Resources

CSAB, Safer Cumbria and CSCP [A Quick Guide to Professional Curiosity](#)

Manchester Children Safeguarding Partners [Difficult Conversations with Parents guide \(July 2018\)](#)

[The importance of professional curiosity in safeguarding adults, Research in Practice 2020](#)

Norfolk Safeguarding Adults Board; [Professional Curiosity webpage](#)

Waltham Forest Safeguarding Partnership; [Bitesize video guide to Professional Curiosity](#)

Rochdale Safeguarding Partnerships; [video Think Family Approach to Safeguarding](#)

Nottingham City Council, NHS Nottingham City CCG and the NCSCB have jointly commissioned a video animation to encourage practitioners to identify children as 'Was Not Brought' as opposed to 'Did Not Attend' when referring to them not being presented at medical appointments; [Re-thinking did not attend](#)