

What is professional curiosity?

Professional curiosity is the ability to explore and understand what is happening with a family or adult. It is about not accepting a situation as it appears, especially if it does not 'feel' right. It requires practitioners to act upon their safeguarding responsibilities

rather than passively make assumptions or take matters at face value. A curious professional will enquire deeply by looking, listening and proactively questioning and challenging all those involved

Why professional curiosity is important?

A lack of professional curiosity is identified regularly by children and adult learning reviews when examining practice in which a child or adult has been harmed. Developing and maintaining a sense of professional curiosity is vital if practitioners are to work together to keep children and adults safe

Barriers to professional curiosity

- Not recognising 'disguised compliance'
- Being too optimistic about a case despite evidence of escalating risks
- Responding to each situation discretely rather than cumulatively
- 'Normalising' actions rather than recognising them for the risks they present
- Deferring to the view of a senior colleague who may not be familiar with the case
- Not recognising your own confirmation bias
- Ignoring information that refutes your view
- Having a 'gut feeling' that something is not right, but no evidence to act
- Allowing individuals to disrupt meetings so that difficult topics do not get discussed

Useful skills for being professionally curious

- Adopt a 'Think Family' approach
- Understand an individual's past to inform your assessment of the future
- Triangulate information from a range of practitioners and others
- Acknowledge your own values and personal bias can affect judgement
- Be respectfully nosy
- Use risk assessment tools alongside professional judgement
- Consider different theories and research to understand a situation
- Be open-minded and not take everything at face value
- Think the unthinkable; believe the unbelievable
- Consider how to articulate 'intuition' into an evidenced, professional view
- Review records, verify 'facts' and record accurately
- Pay as much attention to how people look and behave as to what they say
- Hold a multiagency meeting if you need support
- Take responsibility for the safeguarding role you play in the individual's life
- Have empathy for the lived experience of the individual
- Always try to see the person alone
- Be alert to those who prevent you from engaging with the individual

Having difficult conversations

Raising subjects that are difficult to discuss, even amongst other practitioners, can be daunting, but effective safeguarding means addressing concerns and disagreements as well as challenging the views of others, despite knowing this could raise hostility. Practitioners need to be brave and hold these difficult conversations. So...

- Plan the conversation in advance
- Keep the agenda focused on the issues you need to discuss
- Focus on the needs of the service user
- Be non-confrontational, do not blame and stick to the facts

- Have evidence to back up what you say
- Ensure decision-making is justifiable and transparent
- Show empathy and compassion whilst being real and honest
- Acknowledge 'gut feelings' whilst seeking evidence to underpin those feelings
- Maintain a degree of healthy scepticism
- Recognise disguised compliance
- Apply professional judgement

Top tips

Keep these top tips in mind when having difficult conversations

- Look, Listen, Ask, Check out
- Test out your professional hypothesis
- Do not be afraid to ask the obvious question and share concerns with others
- A 'fresh pair of eyes' on a case can help
- Focus on the need, voice and 'lived experience' of the individual
- Be confident in your own judgement
- Share your view with other practitioners, even if it differs from theirs

Managers can develop practitioners' professional curiosity by:

- Playing 'devil's advocate' and challenging staff to think again about cases
- Presenting alternative hypotheses about what could be happening
- Setting up group supervision to stimulate debate and learning between team colleagues
- Presenting cases from the perspective of others involved
- Asking practitioners to show the evidence and 'working out' of their decisions
- Restricting caseload numbers and complexity
- Recognising when a practitioner is tired
- Recognising when a case could benefit from a fresh pair of eyes
- Not closing cases too quick

More information

www.researchinpractice.org.uk