



What is professional curiosity and why is it important?

Professional Curiosity is the capacity and communication skill to explore and understand what is happening with an individual or within a family, rather than making assumptions or taking a single source of information and accepting it at face value. It is about enquiring deeper and using proactive questioning and challenge and understanding one's own responsibility and knowing when to act.

It is a combination of looking, listening, asking direct questions, checking out and reflecting on ALL of the information received.

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 and which are outlined in this briefing.

What can you learn from Reviews

Local and National Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews consistently identify a lack of professional curiosity as a significant factor and which was reflected in recent Local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews and Discretionary Safeguarding Adult Review in Darlington:

Family H LCSPR - highlighted a lack of professional curiosity relating to the link between the children's behaviour and the possibility of sexual harm. Practitioners need to remain curious about the source of children's distress, behaviour or physical indicators.

Child J LCSPR - highlighted a lack of professional curiosity about the men involved in the children's lives, whilst these men were known, there was no exploration of how involved they were in the children's lives. Non-attendance at health appointments across child and adult services, these were not patterned and viewed in the context of wider neglect for the children and mother who sought services and help for herself but then did not engage. Disguised compliance was not considered.

Philip & Loraine LLR - highlighted a lack of professional curiosity relating to the understanding of the medical condition hoarding disorder and what is important for the adult and how this might be used to influence positive changes within their lifestyle.

What are the potential barriers to professional curiosity?

Being professionally curious is not always easy, there may be many barriers to this, including from practitioners themselves, such as focusing on one particular issue or having over optimism, making assumptions, lacking the confidence or assertiveness to ask sensitive questions and unconscious bias.

Poor supervision, complexity and pressures of work, changes of case worker leading to repeatedly 'starting again', closing cases too quickly and fixed thinking can also barriers to a professionally curious approach.

Children in particular, and some adults, 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 practitioners. Therefore other barriers may be presented by the individuals and families we work with, such as not wishing to answer questions, questioning a practitioner's intentions and disguised compliance.

What is disguised compliance?

Professional curiosity is needed when working with families who are displaying disguised compliance, as this involves parents, carers, adults or family members giving the appearance of co-operating with agencies to avoid raising suspicions and allay concerns.

There is a continuum of behaviours with full co-operation at one end of the scale and planned and effective resistance at the other, at it's worst superficial cooperation may be to conceal deliberate abuse. There may be situations where an adult or family member appears to be co-operating with professionals while actually avoiding scrutiny or delaying necessary interventions.

The following principles will help you manage disguised compliance more effectively:

- Focus on the needs, voice and 'lived experience' of the child, young person or adult
- Avoid being encouraged to focus on the needs and presentation of the parents/carers or family members
- Think carefully about the 'engagement' of the parent/carer or family member and the impact of this behaviour on your view of risk
- Focus on change in the family dynamic and the impact this will have on the life and wellbeing of the child, young person or adult—a more reliable measure than the agreement of adults or carers in the professionals plan
- There is some evidence that an empathetic approach may result in an increased level of trust and a more open family response leading to greater disclosure
- Build close professional working relationships with families whilst being constantly aware of the child or adult's needs and the degree to which they are met
- There is no magic way of spotting disguised compliance other than discrepancy between an adult or carers accounts and observations of the needs and accounts of the child or adult

How can Practitioners be more professionally curious, what should you consider?

- **'Seeing the whole picture'** - as Practitioners, you should not presume to know what is happening in the family home and should always ask questions and seek clarity if you are not certain, consider all members of a household and those in the wider circle involved in the life of the child or adult.
- **'Having confidence'** —don't be afraid to ask questions, do so in an open way so they know you are asking to ensure that children or themselves are safe, not to judge or criticise.
- **'Making assumptions'**—be open to the unexpected and incorporate information that does not support your initial professional assumptions into any assessments you make of what life is like for an individual.
- **'Information gathering'** - Consider information from different sources to gain a better understanding of family functioning - Seek clarity from family or other professionals.
- **'Challenge'** - be open to having your own assumptions, views and interpretations challenged and be open to challenging others.
- **'Knowing but not knowing'**—consider what you see as well as what you're told—are there any visual clues as to what life is like, or which don't correlate with the information you already hold?
- **'Supervision'** - use supervision as an opportunity to explore cases and exercise professional curiosity, for example, by playing 'devil's advocate'; presenting alternative hypotheses; presenting cases from the child, young person, adult or another family member's perspective.