

The Importance of Professional Curiosity Briefing



What is professional curiosity and why is it important?

Professional Curiosity is the capacity and communication skill to explore and understand what is happening within a family or for an individual rather than making assumptions or taking a single source of information and accepting things at face value. Local and National Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews consistently identify a lack of professional curiosity as a significant factor. An example of where practitioners were seen to have taken information at face value was in the case of [Daniel Pelka](#).

Professional curiosity means:

- Testing out professional assumptions about different types of families
- Considering 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
- Seeing past the obvious; and
- Questioning what is observed.

It is a combination of looking, listening, asking direct questions, checking out and reflecting on all the information received. Professional curiosity is a recurring theme within safeguarding reviews, highlighting the need to fully understand a family's situation. Therefore, professional curiosity is important, as it enables a practitioner to have a holistic view and understanding of what is happening within a family and what life is like for an individual and use this information to fully assess potential risks. Being professionally curious enables practitioners to challenge parents/ carers, to understand a child or young person's vulnerability or risk, while maintaining an objective, professional and supportive approach.

How can practitioners be professionally curious?

- As practitioners, you should not presume to know what is happening in the family home and should ask questions and seek clarity from the family or other professionals, if you are not certain.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions of families, and do so in an open way, so they know that you are asking to ensure that children are safe, not to judge or criticise.
- Seek clarity about unknown adults within the family home to understand how they are involved in family life.
- Be open to the unexpected and incorporate information that does not support your initial assumptions into your assessment of what life is like for an individual.
- Be open to having your own assumptions, views and interpretations challenged, and be open to challenging others.
- 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?
- Use supervision as an opportunity to explore cases and exercise professional curiosity, for example by playing 'devil's advocate'; presenting alternative hypotheses; and presenting cases from the child, young person, adult or another family member's perspectives.

What are potential barriers to professional curiosity?

Being professionally curious is not always easy. There may be barriers to this, including those from practitioners themselves such as:

- Over optimism
- Making assumptions
- Lacking the confidence or assertiveness to ask sensitive questions and
- Unconscious bias.

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.

Barriers may also be presented by people we work with, such as not wishing to answer questions, questioning a practitioners' intentions and what some organisations call disguised compliance. The [Safeguarding Network](#) summarises this as: focusing on one particular issue; being critical of professionals; failing to engage with services; and avoiding contact with professionals. It is important to recognise any potential barriers and work with the child, young person or family to overcome these. When barriers may be coming from an individual or family it is important to work restoratively with them, explaining why you are asking questions or seeking clarification, so they understand it is to help support them and their family with regards to their welfare and safety.

What is Disguised Compliance?

Professional curiosity 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; and many case reviews highlight that professionals can sometimes delay or avoid interventions due to parental disguised compliance. See NSPCC briefing on [disguised compliance](#).

The following principles will help front line practitioners manage disguised compliance more effectively:

- focus on the needs, voice and 'lived experience' of the child or young person
- avoid being encouraged to focus extensively on the needs and presentation of the adults or carers – whether aggressive argumentative or apparently compliant
- think carefully about the 'engagement' of the adult or carers and the impact of this behaviour on the practitioners view of risk
- focus on change in the family dynamic and the impact this will have on the life and well-being of the child, young person or adult – this is a more reliable measure than the agreement of adults or carers in the professionals plan
- there is some evidence that an empathetic approach by professionals may result in an increased level of trust and a more open family response leading to greater disclosure by children, young people and their families
- practitioners need to 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