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**Professional curiosity**

**Practice guidance**

April 2024

This practice guidance is for all professionals working with children, young people, parents, carers, and adults with care and support needs.

Being professionally curious is fundamental to how we work with children, young people, their families and adults with care and support needs, and other professionals. To work alongside people, we need to understand their perspectives and lived experiences so that we can support them to achieve their full potential.

Professional curiosity is something that can be applied in all relationships, including children, young people, parents/carers and adults with care and support needs, wider communities, and networks of support. It also applies to the relationships we have with other professionals and the relationship we have with ourselves. By understanding multiple perspectives, we gain a deeper understanding of each other meaning that we are better able to work together.

Professional curiosity is a regular learning point that arises from both Safeguarding Adult Reviews (SARS), Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews (CSPR) and Domestic Homicide Review (DHRs). Several recent Safeguarding Practice Reviews undertaken by the NYSCP have found that developing a deeper understanding of family dynamics by asking professionally curious questions may have led to improved outcomes for children and their families.

This guidance may be used to help anyone to gain an understanding of professional curiosity, what it means in practice, and how it can be used to develop deeper and more meaningful relationships with people and develop professional practice.

## What is Professional Curiosity?

Professional curiosity is a practice mindset and communication skill that involves exploring and understanding what is happening by asking questions and maintaining an open mind. It is about understanding one’s own responsibility in managing risk and safety and knowing when to act, rather than making assumptions and taking things at face value.

All interactions that professionals have with children, young people, families, and adults with care and support needs, and other professionals provide a valuable opportunity to develop meaningful and rich conversations and relationships based on seeing and developing strengths. To do this, we need to actively seek to gain a full and deep understanding of their lives of the people we are working with.

**Professional curiosity requires professionals to:**

* Think ‘outside the box’ to a holistic picture of the individual and/or family circumstances.
* Look beyond the surface to explore the lives of the people you are working with in more depth.
* Show a real willingness to talk to and listen to the people you are working with and those supportive networks around them, to understand their lived experiences.
* Actively seek to consider the views of all, including through discussion with other professionals and seek evidence to support your curiosity and the information that is being shared with you.
* Be able to appropriately challenge thinking and decision making, either that of the person you are working with, other professionals or organisations or your own thinking (see professional challenge document).
* Ask the ‘second question’, this means in addition to asking ‘what’ is happening, asking ‘why’ it is happening?
* Spend time talking and listening with the people you are working with, either in their home, in communities and public spaces, in professional discussions or through telephone or online interactions.

Professional curiosity considers many aspects of communication and involves professionals being aware of and considering talk, play, behaviour, relational interactions, nonverbal cues, vocal tone, and touch when developing an understanding of what life is like for the people we are working with.

When working with children who are pre-verbal, or children, young people and adults who may be non-verbal it is particularly important to have a heightened awareness and curiosity about all forms of non-verbal communication, including behaviours, reactions, expressions and play.

## 2. Barriers to professional curiosity

***Credit: This section of the guidance has been developed using guidance from Norfolk Safeguarding Adults Board.***

It is important to understand barriers to professional curiosity to try to eliminate them. Barriers to professional curiosity include the following.

**The ’rule of optimism’**

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.

**Accumulating risk, seeing the whole picture**

Professionals may tend to respond to each situation or new risk on its own, rather than assessing the new information within the context of the whole person or looking at the cumulative effect of a series of incidents and information.

**Normalisation**

This refers to social processes through which ideas and actions come to be seen as 'normal' and become taken-for-granted or 'natural' in everyday life. Because they are seen as ‘normal’ they stop being questioned and so are not recognised or assessed as potential risks.

**Professional deference**

Professionals who have most contact with the individual are in a good position to recognise when the risks to the person are escalating. However, there can be a tendency to defer to the opinion of a ‘higher status’ professional who has limited contact with the person but who views the risk as less significant. Be confident in your own judgement and always outline your observations and concerns to other professionals, be courageous and challenge their opinion of risk if it varies from your own.

**Confirmation bias**

This is when we look for evidence that supports or confirms our pre-held view (consciously or unconsciously) and ignores information that doesn’t support that view. It happens when we filter out potentially useful facts and opinions that don't match our preconceived ideas.

**Understanding multiple perspectives**

Professionally curious practitioners recognise that families and professionals may not always agree on what support is required or what the risks are, and it is important that everyone involved in the planning is able to share their views.

**Dealing with certainty**

Professionals are often presented with concerns which are impossible to “substantiate”. Professionals may often seek out confirmation of certainty for example when looking at safety and wellbeing. Professionally curious practitioners understand the relationship between feeling “safe” and feeling “certain” and that the two can be confused. They are aware that complete certainly can be very difficult to attain and instead work in an area of ‘**safe uncertainty’**, where multiple theories are considered with an ongoing curiosity.

## Developing skills in professional curiosity

**Think the unthinkable; believe the unbelievable. Consider how you can articulate ‘intuition’ into an evidenced, professional view.**

* Listen to what the person is saying and importantly what are they not saying? What is the person trying to tell you? How do they look? How are they acting? What behaviours are they demonstrating? What non-verbal cues are they demonstrating? How is the tone of their voice? How are they communicating with others around them? A trauma informed approach to practice acknowledges the need to see beyond individuals presenting behaviours and to ask, “what does this person need?”
* Seek to explore different methods for capturing and understanding the voice and experiences of person you are working with. Considering those who may have language or communication needs, consider personalised approaches.
* Ensure, as much as possible, that decisions are made with full understanding of the person who is being supported.
* Speak to other professionals regularly, ensure timely information sharing. Don’t wait for meetings.
* Seek to test and triangulate information, build evidence to support your thinking.
	+ Have other people heard, seen, been told, or felt the same as you?
	+ Have other practitioners heard, seen, been told, or felt differently to you?
* When developing an understanding of what life is like for the person you are working with, input and conversation from multiple perspectives is better than only listening to one.
* Never assume and be wary of assumptions already made. Establish the facts and gather evidence about what is happening.
* Sometimes the most important relationship to trust, is the one with yourself. If you have a feeling or intuition that something is not right, acknowledge this and proactively seek to build evidence that may support or challenge your feeling. Be professionally curious about yourself and your own practice and why you may be feeling the way you are.
* Don’t use professional jargon. Talk to people using language and communication tools they understand and can relate to.
* Actively seek to establish a positive relationship with the person you are supporting. Look at the network around them to explore creative ways to develop this.
* Look at tools that can promote honest discussions with the people you are supporting and explore their values e.g., Genograms.
* Consider different perspectives and hypothesis about what is happening. Use supervision and discussions with professionals to explore different ideas. Be mindful that a different hypothesis may be worth consideration i.e., both/and, rather than, and/or, and that hypothesis may change and develop over time.
* Focus on outcomes rather than process to remain person centred.
* If you feel something is not right or you don’t understand something, ask “what else can I find out?”

**Professional curiosity is likely to flourish when practitioners:**

* Attend good quality training to help them develop.
* Have access to good management and professional support and have opportunity supervision and peer reflection.
* Have empathy and ‘walk in the shoes’ of the person to consider the situation from their lived experience.
* Remain diligent in working with the child, young person, adult with care and support needs, their family or network, to develop a professional relationship to understand what has happened and its impact on all involved.
* Always try to see the child, young person or adult with care and support needs on their own.
* Listen to people who speak on behalf of the child, young person or adult with care and support needs or their family or carer, who have important knowledge about them.
* Be alert to those who prevent you from seeing or listening to the child, young person or adult with care and support needs.
* Be mindful of why some people may not feel comfortable in sharing information with you and seek to provide assurance to encourage more open conversations.
* Do not rely on the opinion of only one person, wherever possible.
* Have an analytical and reflective approach.
* Develop the skills and knowledge to hold professionally curious conversations and challenge thinking (both the thinking of others and our own).

## Professional curiosity and culturally competent safeguarding practice

All professionals must be professionally curious about a child, young person or adult with care and support need’s faith, culture, and nationality, and take personal responsibility for informing their work with sufficient knowledge or seeking advice to support this.

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
* Timing requests for expert support and information appropriately to ensure that assessments, care planning and review are sound and holistic.

## Supporting professionally curious practice

Supervision and professional discussions, and refection on our own practice and thinking, are an opportunity to question and explore an understanding of the lives of people, to look at their lives through different lens and explore different hypotheses, narratives, and stories.

Professionally curious practice can flourish by,

* Asking questions that encourage practitioners to considers multiple perspectives.
* Questioning whether outcomes have improved for the person and evidence for this.
* Presenting alternative hypotheses about what could be happening.
* Providing opportunities for group supervision which can help stimulate debate and curious questioning and allow practitioners to learn from one another’s experiences.
* Considering that the issues considered in one case may be reflected in other cases for other team members and provide opportunities for wider learning.
* Presenting cases from the perspective of other family members or professionals.
* Asking practitioners what led them to arrive at their conclusion and support them to think through the evidence.
* Monitoring workloads and encourage practitioners to talk about and support them to address issues of stress or pressure.

Below are questions for consideration and reflection in supervision, professional discussions, and self-reflection.

* How professionally curious are you?
* Does it change throughout your day? What do you think influences this?
* Does it change with different cases? What do you think influences this?
* Does it change with the different roles you take on throughout the day or throughout your career?

## Additional Resources

1. [Professional Curiosity YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEdNGbnvzRs) short version 2-minute video.
2. [Professional Curiosity Animation (youtube.com)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_dedMlo0x_o&t=769s) longer version 20-minute video
3. [Professional curiosity in safeguarding adults: Strategic Briefing (2020) | Research in Practice](https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/adults/publications/2020/december/professional-curiosity-in-safeguarding-adults-strategic-briefing-2020/)
4. [Bitesize Guide: Professional Curiosity on Vimeo](https://vimeo.com/272754227)