

What is professional curiosity and why is it important?

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 is often described as “respectful uncertainty” or “keeping an open mind”. It requires skills of looking, listening, asking direct questions and being able to hold difficult conversations. Nurturing professional curiosity and challenge are a fundamental aspect of working together to keep children and adults safe from harm. This approach is important in helping to identify abuse and neglect which is less obvious and can ensure that the right information is gathered to assess 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.

Developing skills in professional curiosity

LOOK

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

LISTEN

- Are you being told anything that needs further clarification? Ask probing and direct questions to clarify your understanding.
- What do you hear family members say to each other? Does it cause you concern? Does it reflect your assessment? Is it consistent with what other professionals are hearing?
- Is someone in the family trying to tell you something, but finding it difficult to express themselves or speak openly? Use opened ended questions, summaries and reflect back to them what you think you have heard and give them space to add to it.
- If you recognise any hesitance or resistance – roll with this and come back to your area of concern later in your discussion
- Make time and space to have a private conversation with a child or adult who may be at risk of abuse or neglect, or subject to coercion and control.
- Consider the impact of trauma they may have experienced/or are experiencing and how this could be a barrier to communication. Support them to feel safe in your discussion through affirming their feelings e.g. I can see how hard this is for you.

ASK

Research indicates those who experience abuse, including coercion and control want practitioners to ask direct questions and that it is easier to respond to a direct question than offer information independently.

- I've noticed you have this injury. Is there anything going on for you which may have caused this?
- Do you feel frightened of anyone?
- Do you feel safe living here?
- Who makes decisions about what you can and cannot do?
- When you are not feeling safe or have a worry who can you talk to?
- Some of the things you have told me today concern me. Is somebody hurting you or are you afraid someone might hurt you in the future?

CLARIFY

- Are other professionals involved? What information do they have?
- Have other professional seen the same as you?
- Are professionals being told the same or different things?
- Are others concerned?

If so, what action has been taken and is there anything else which should or could be done by you or someone else?

Holding difficult conversations

Responding to disagreements or hostility, raising concerns, and giving information that may not be well received are incredibly challenging and difficult things to do. The following tips can support practitioners in holding difficult conversations:

- Plan to ensure there will be time to cover essential elements of the conversation.
- Consider the child and family history and experiences and how this may be impacting on their decision making, behaviour and communication
- Consider if the child/adult has a learning need and ensure age appropriate communication and approaches are drawn on
- Keep the agenda focused on the topics you need to discuss.
- Be clear and unambiguous.
- Have courage and focus on the needs of the child or adult at risk.
- Be non-confrontational, use trauma informed language, non-blaming and shaming.
- Stick to the facts and have evidence to back up what you say.
- Ensure decision making is justifiable and transparent.
- Show empathy, consideration, and compassion.

With thanks to Stockport, Manchester Safeguarding Partnership, Norfolk Safeguarding Adults Board and Waltham Forest Council for kindly sharing their resources on professional curiosity.

- Demonstrate congruence i.e. make sure your tone, body language and content of speech are open and consistent.
- Consider the child's / adult's needs for advocacy support.

Additional resources and further reading

[Manchester Safeguarding Partnership](#)

[Norfolk Safeguarding Adults Board Professional Curiosity Guidance](#)

[Research in Practice - Professional curiosity in safeguarding adults](#)

[Research in Practice for adults – Coercive control Tools and Resources](#)

[Waltham Forest Professional Curiosity Video](#)

From several reviews recently commissioned in Cheshire West we have highlighted significant learning around the importance of professional curiosity in supporting an effective safeguarding response.

The Think Family SAR/SCR with the pseudo name Family X has recently been published and learning from this case can be found here on the Children's and Adult's Website at

- [Children's Case Review](#)
- [Safeguarding Adult Reviews](#)

A range of safeguarding courses are available through the Adult Safeguarding Board and the Safeguarding Children's Partnership <https://www.cheshirewestscp.co.uk/>

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