

Professional Curiosity 7 Minute Briefing

1. Background

Learning from national and local case reviews tells us that sometimes children may have been safeguarded and protected from harm if practitioners working with the family had been more “professionally curious”. If practitioners had asked questions to further explore situations that were presented to them, they may have been able to get a better understanding of what it was really like for the child living in those circumstances, and therefore make a better assessment of risks and needs.

2. What does Professional Curiosity mean?

Professional curiosity means sometimes acting on gut instinct, being willing and able to ask the questions that might seem difficult even if you’re not comfortable doing so, being able to deal with the answers and make sense of what is happening. Research tells us that practitioners who demonstrate professional curiosity are able to tolerate uncertainty, are non-defensive, open-minded, strengths based, interested in stories, questioning, willing to challenge and able to use reflective and analytical skills (Thacker et al, 2020).

3. Why is it important?

In the words of a survivor of abuse: “when someone asked me about my experiences, it didn’t open a can of worms, it opened doors for me” (Danny from Lads Like Us)

Being brave and asking the right questions and then being willing to work with the answers by really listening and trying to understand someone’s experiences can be a crucial turning point for them.

4. What could be going on?

For a child there could be any number of circumstances or situations going on at home or in the community that are not immediately obvious. This could be physical, emotional or sexual abuse, [domestic violence](#) in the home, parents with drug, alcohol or mental health problems, [criminal exploitation](#), homelessness, financial issues, [cultural or identity](#) difficulties....

5. Barriers to curiosity

Individual factors such as your own experiences and values could get in the way, e.g. a fear of offending, as could avoidance of uncovering information you don’t feel able to deal with for whatever reason. Or you may be so used to seeing certain behaviours or situations that you don’t really notice them anymore. Factors such as a lack of support for practitioners and not enough time and space to reflect can be a barrier.

6. A simple question

To open up a conversation and delve deeper than what is presented at surface level can be as simple as asking a straightforward question:

“Is anything going on at home that I can help you with?”

“Why are you not in school today?”

“Does anybody make you feel afraid? Or sad?”

“What beliefs are important to you?”

Be prepared for what you might hear!

7. Practice tips

Take notice of any feelings of uneasiness or uncertainty.

Make time and space in your working day to pause and reflect on what you have seen and heard. What do you know for sure? What assumptions have you made?

Discuss any concerns with colleagues, with partner organisations and with your supervisor.

Prepare for any difficult conversations and be ready to respond with respect and empathy. Take action on what you find out.

Additional Information

Adapted from Research in Practice learning materials www.researchinpractice.org.uk

Date Published: September 2023

Visit: <https://safeguardingchildren.salford.gov.uk/>

Email: SSCP@salford.gov.uk
