

Professional curiosity is the skill to explore and understand what is happening within a family rather than making assumptions or accepting versions of events or disclosures at face value.

Professional curiosity is a combination of looking, listening, asking direct questions, checking out and reflecting on information received. It means not taking a single source of information and accepting it at face value. It means seeing past the obvious.

It can also be described as the need for practitioners to practice 'respectful uncertainty'

### Why is it important?

It is important that we 'think the unthinkable'. It is natural and right to believe the best of the family member you're working with, and thinking the unthinkable doesn't mean thinking the worse. It means thinking objectively and keeping an open mind about the evidence presented. Challenging others requires expertise, time, confidence, and emotional energy. Consider following up with appropriate questions to gather more information to support your understanding of what you are being told or observing.

### How we do it

Curious professionals engage with individuals and families through visits, conversations, observations and asking relevant questions to gather historical and current information.

Be observant when completing home visits or meeting with family members (including those meetings undertaken virtually). It is also important to consider all non-attendances (was not brought), within a risk context. Try to analyse all the available information and record all concerns and considerations. Base your analysis on the evidence presented and try to avoid making assumptions. Try to maintain the focus on the needs of the child and parent/carer, avoid over-identifying with parents/carers. It is natural to be optimistic but over-optimism can be a barrier to professional curiosity and assessing risk effectively.

- Always be alert to potential signs of abuse and neglect
- Explore fully what the daily lived experience is for that child and parent/carer in the household
- Discuss the child and parent/carer's views and wishes
- Seek advice, guidance and second opinions when there is uncertainty or suspicion
- Work in partnership with other agencies/ practitioners, sharing appropriately any concerns or findings
- Consider alternative hypotheses/ explanations
- Try not to make assumptions, be mindful of your own and others unconscious bias
- Be confident to ask sensitive or probing questions and to be open with families about the reasons for this and your concerns
- Use supervision appropriately to discuss concerns of disguised compliance

### What does good practice look like?

#### Looking

- ⇒ Is there anything about what I am seeing in my interaction with this child or family which prompts questions or makes me feel uneasy or concerned?
- ⇒ Am I observing behaviour which is indicative of abuse or neglect?
- ⇒ Does what I am seeing support or contradict what I am being told?

#### Listening

- ⇒ Am I being told anything which requires further clarification?
- ⇒ Am I concerned about what I am hearing family members saying to each other?

⇒ Is someone in this family trying to tell me something but finding it difficult to express themselves? If so, how can I help them to do so?

## Asking

Professionals need to enquire about the significant people in families' lives that influence them. This may be someone who provides care, or supports the family or individual – for example, another family member, a friend, someone from the community or father of any children and so on. Professionals need to be brave and have what are often difficult or awkward conversations about the issues affecting families. These could be domestic abuse, inadequate housing, self-neglect, social isolation, mental health, drugs and alcohol, or issues between a person and carer.

A simple practice is to use the restorative framework:

- Gaining perspective - What has happened? What has led up to this happening? What has been the worst thing which has happened? What happened next?
- Understanding emotion - What do you think / feel about this? What were you thinking / feeling at the time? What do you think / feel now?
- Exploring impact and affect - who is affected and how are they affected? Who is impacted by what has happened? How does this impact you?
- Ways forward - what do you see needs to happen next? How can things change? What needs to happen to move forward?

## How to be curious

1. Explain at the first visit that you may have to ask personal or sensitive questions
2. Never disregard information because it does not fit with your understanding – be open to the unexpected and willing to change your opinion
3. Do not make presumptions about what is happening in a family home
4. Ask questions in an open and relaxed manner – explain that the intention is not to interrogate but to understand
5. Beware of inconsistent explanations, vague or retracted disclosures
6. Do not discount concerns just because they are unproven – concerns may be both valid and impossible to substantiate
7. Explanations from the family need to be collated with observation and other sources of information – is the overall picture consistent?
8. Home visits should include seeing the whole home, especially where the child sleeps
9. Think family – who else has an important role in the child's life? Are they also vulnerable?
10. Seek consent to speak to the professional network– serious case reviews repeatedly find that had all of the information held by different agencies been collated it would have led to a much clearer picture of the risk to the child
11. Be aware of how your own background, culture and beliefs impact on the way you interpret a situation
12. Seek a second opinion – talk any doubts through with an appropriate colleague, i.e. (depending on your role) your designated safeguarding lead or line supervisor

Albert Einstein once said "**I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious.**" So remember there may be a little bit of Einstein in all of us