



TEA-BREAK GUIDE



What is Professional Curiosity?

Professional curiosity is the capacity and communication skill to explore and understand what is happening within a family rather than making assumptions or accepting things at face value. This has been described as the need for practitioners to practice 'respectful uncertainty' – applying critical evaluation to any information they receive and maintaining an open mind. In safeguarding the term 'safe uncertainty' is used to describe an approach which is focused on safety but that takes into account changing information, different perspectives and acknowledges that certainty may not be achievable.

Professional curiosity can require practitioners to think 'outside the box', beyond their usual professional role, and consider families' circumstances holistically. Professional curiosity and a real willingness to engage with children, adults and their families or carers are vital to promoting safety and stability for everyone. Much has been written about the importance of curiosity during home visits and the need for authentic, close relationships of the kind where we see, hear and touch the truth of their experience of 'daily life' and are able to act on it and to achieve similar closeness with parents or carers. Practitioners will often come into contact with a child, young person, adult or their family when they are in crisis or vulnerable to harm. These interactions present crucial opportunities for protection. Responding to these opportunities requires the ability to recognise (or see the signs of) vulnerabilities and potential or actual risks of harm, maintaining an open stance of professional curiosity (or enquiring deeper), and understanding one's own responsibility and knowing how to take action.

Children in particular, but also 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 professionals across agencies. We know that it is better to help as early as possible, before issues get worse. That means that all agencies and practitioners need to work together – the first step is to be professionally curious. Curious professionals will spend time engaging with families on visits. They will know that talk, play and touch can all be important to observe and consider. Do not presume you know what is happening in the family home – ask questions and seek clarity if you are not certain. Do not be afraid to ask questions of families, and do so in an open way so they know that you are asking to keep the child or adult safe, not to judge or criticise. Be open to the unexpected, and incorporate information that does not support your initial assumptions into your assessment of what life is like for the child or adult in the family.

Thinking the Un-thinkable

The following factors highlight the need for all of us to strive to improve professional curiosity and professional courage:

- the views and feelings of children and some adults are actually very difficult to ascertain
- practitioners do not always listen to adults who tried to speak on behalf of a child or another adult and who may have important information to contribute
- parents or carers can easily prevent practitioners from seeing and listening to a child or another adult
- practitioners can be fooled with stories we want to believe are true
- effective multi-agency work needs to be coordinated
- challenging parents or carers (and colleagues) requires expertise, confidence, time and a considerable amount of emotional energy.

Tips for practice

- play 'devil's advocate'
- present alternative hypotheses
- present cases from the child, young person, adult or another family member's perspective.

Professional Challenge

Differences of opinion, concerns and issues can arise for practitioners at work and it is important they are resolved as effectively and swiftly as possible. Professional differences and disagreements can help us find better ways improve outcomes for children, adults and families. Read the Tea-Break Guide on Professional Disagreements to find more out about this topic.