

Professional Curiosity Briefing 1 of 2

What is professional curiosity?

Building strong relationships with children, adults and their families, based on care and compassion is crucial in promoting disclosure of abuse and to reducing environments where abuse and neglect exist. For this to occur there needs to be interest and curiosity into people's narratives, which needs to be part of the organisations and individual practitioners mind sets. To work with families with compassion, but retain an open and questioning mind set, requires regular, challenging supervision and time for analysis and reflection of cases. People are more likely to make disclosures of abuse when they feel safe and listened to; sometimes this may only be a partial disclosure which requires professional curiosity to enquire further.

Why is it important?

Professionals often come into contact with a child, young person or their family when the child is vulnerable to harm. These interactions present opportunities for protection that should not be missed. 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.

Children rarely disclose abuse directly to adults working with them and, if they do, it will often be through unusual behaviour or comments. This can make identifying abuse and neglect difficult for professionals across all agencies.

How is it achieved?

It is better to help children as early as possible, before issues get worse. All agencies and professionals working with children and families need to work together; the first step is to be professionally curious. Curious professionals will spend time engaging with families on visits, using their skills to observe and interact. 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 children 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 children in the family. Professional curiosity is the ability to enquire, investigate and explore what is happening with the child or family beyond the presenting concerns. Professionals need the time to reflect and formulate information and if supervision or time is not readily accessible to do this then this should be escalated within your organisation. The following will support professional curiosity being achieved;

- Skills in analysis
- Appropriate time allowances are built into workload allocations to facilitate reflection
- Practitioner supervision
- Appropriate questioning during interactions
- Relationship building with children, families and other agencies
- Direct work with children and families
- Communication skills and
- The courage to have a difficult conversation

Application to risk assessments:

Ensure that when you are assessing and monitoring concerns that you use a process of triangulation:

- Have you included the perspective of the child/young person in your assessment?
- Have you had a case discussion with a your supervisor or safeguarding team / professional?
- Has multi-agency information sharing taken place?
- Have you ensured that any personal or professional bias is removed from your assessment?
- What information do the case records hold (chronology), are there any themes/patterns/trends?
- What are the family/friends/neighbours saying, does it corroborate self-reporting or are there discrepancies to follow up?
- What information is held by other professionals and what is their analysis of the current situation?
- Have you used your professional skills to articulate “gut feelings” so that they can be monitored and reviewed?
- Have you used the information to inform decision making and to reflect upon and review current strategies?
- Do you know when to use the Lincolnshire Safeguarding Children Partnership [escalation/resolution policy](#)?

Learning and development opportunities

- Lincolnshire Safeguarding Children Partnership offers a wide range of face to face and e:learning [training opportunities](#). Each course has embedded professional curiosity as a theme. For further information contact Safeguarding_Training@lincolnshire.gov.uk
- Attend training and make use any guidance offered by your individual agency.
- Make use of 1:1/reflective supervision meetings with your manager in order to reflect upon any concerns or risk assessments and gain support to examine the evidence base.
- If your agency offers group supervision opportunities these are beneficial as it allows for peers to act as a “critical friend.”

Additional resources:

- Pathways to harm, pathways to protection: a triennial analysis of serious case reviews, 2011- 2014, DfE, 2016
- Thinking the unthinkable, Shahid, Professional Social Work, BASW, November 2013
- Serious Case Reviews learning for individual agencies, Research in Practice, 2016.
- Child Neglect be professional curious!, Investigators/Practitioners Guidance Note, National Multi-Agency Child Neglect Strategic Work Group, 2015
- Disguised compliance and the importance of professional curiosity, Sue Woolmore (film), Safeguarding Children academy, Virtual College
- Supervision and the Dynamics of Collusion: A rule of Optimism, Revell, L & Burton, V, The British Journal of Social Work, Volume 46, Issue 6, 2006

Lincolnshire Safeguarding Children Partnership:

The Lincolnshire Safeguarding Children Partnership business plan identifies [six strategic priorities](#) the partnership is focused on for the current period of 2018-21.

Professional curiosity spans all of our strategic priorities and is an essential part of working together to keep children and young people safe.

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2 of 2

Professional Curiosity Briefing 2 of 2



Examples from Lincolnshire practice & reviews

Serious Case Review Child F

This review found that the mother of Child F was attending a range of health and social care appointments with a man; but claiming that they were not in an intimate relationship nor providing a caring role to Child F. Greater professional curiosity and multi-agency information gathering & sharing about this male had the potential to have identified sooner that this man was present in the home and cared for Child F, which could have led to earlier risk identification and management to protect Child F.

Domestic Homicide Review Charlotte & Claire Hart

Luke, Ryan and Charlotte Hart grew up in a household where coercive control was their everyday experience of life. As children they did not know that this was not a usual, safe and nurturing environment to grow up in. There would have been opportunities throughout their childhoods for professionals to have identified that the level of control exerted by their father was significant and impacted upon their social and emotional development. The controlling behaviour and psychological abuse was in fact high risk domestic abuse which was not identified until after Charlotte and their mother Claire were murdered in 2016.

The review identified areas where professionals may have been able to identify that the children's behaviours were different from that of their peers, or that their father never attended school or social events. A greater degree of professional curiosity may have enabled the children to share the details of their life outside of school and for professionals to have analysed this further to recognise domestic abuse. Additional signs may have been anxiety about being late home and not having friends visit their home. In addition both parents disclosed vague reference to the control exerted within the home and professional curiosity of enquiring further about statements such as "marital stress" "having problems with wife and children" "isolating himself from the rest of the family because of arguments".

Serious Case Review Child E

Alex was murdered by his grandfather in 2014. Health professionals working with the adult were aware of the risk of violence from the grandfather and that he had grandchildren. When Alex's family shared their concerns about risks to them as adults, greater professional curiosity may have led to the identification of a history of domestic abuse and therefore a wider assessment of risk that included Alex and his sister.

National Learning:

Remember, this theme is recurring on a national basis with a following high profile cases making reference to professional curiosity:

- Lord Laming recommended that "respectful uncertainty" should be applied to critically analysing any information received (Victoria Climbié Enquiry, 2003).
- Professor Harry Ferguson noted the importance of professional curiosity during home visits when discussing the cases of Peter Connelly (SCR, 2009) and Daniel Pelka (SCR, 2013).
- Jenny Myers discussed a "lack of professional curiosity" by agencies when assessing the role the child's father was playing in her life (SCR ADS14 "Polly", Derbyshire, 2017).