

Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Board

Learning & Improvement Briefing Sheet 9

Professional Curiosity-See Past The Obvious

What do we mean by 'professional curiosity'?

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 testing out your professional assumptions about different types of families. It means triangulating information from different sources to gain a better understanding of family functioning which, in turn, helps to make predictions about what is likely to happen in the future. It means seeing past the obvious.

Is this a new approach and will it mean extra work for me?

Not if you are already doing your job well. But if you apply a 'tick box' approach to completing assessments or conducting consultations with children and families then it will require you to take more time to be curious and ask questions, and to check out what you are told with other family members and other professionals.

Why is it important in working with children and their families?

Learning from case reviews, both nationally and locally, is that responding to presenting issues in isolation and a lack of professional curiosity can lead to missed opportunities to identify less obvious indicators of vulnerability or significant harm, and we know that in the worst circumstances this has resulted in death or serious abuse.

Is exercising professional curiosity easy and straight forward?

Not always. Especially with those parents who demonstrate disguised compliance or coercive control. Families can appear to be engaging with professionals, but are not able or willing to change as a result of an intervention. Or certain family members are unable through fear to be open and honest about the family dynamics. It is with these families that professionals need to exercise most curiosity.

- **Question your own assumptions** about how families function and guard against **over optimism**
- Recognise how your **own feelings** (for example tiredness, feeling rushed or illness) might impact on their view of a child or family on a given day
- Demonstrate a willingness to have **less than 'comfortable' interactions with families** when this is necessary
- Address any professional anxiety about how **hostile or resistant families** might react to being asked direct or difficult questions
- Remain **open minded** and expect the unexpected
- Appreciate that **respectful scepticism and challenge** are healthy – it is ok to question what you are told
- Ensure you are able to recognise **disguised compliance**
- Understand the impact of **coercive control** on the behaviour and responses of family members
- Understand the cumulative impact on children of **multiple or combined risk factors**, e.g. domestic abuse, parental drug/alcohol misuse, parental mental health (previously referred to as 'toxic mix')
- Ensure that your **practice is reflective** and that you have access to **good quality supervision**



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Professional Curiosity (page 2)

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

- ⇒ Are there direct questions which I could ask in my direct contact with this family which will provide more information about the vulnerability of individual family members?

- How do members of your family deal with conflict?
- How do adults in the household respond to stress?
- What arrangements are in place for the child or young person to access education?
- Who are the professionals working with individual members of your family?
- What is it like to be (name) living in this family/household?
- What is a typical day like for you?
- Who is this with you at this appointment?
- Who is living with you?
- Why are you not at school?
- What is the first thing you think of when you get up in the morning and/or the last thing you think of before you go to sleep?
- When were you last happy?
- Do you feel safe?
- What do you look forward to?
- Are there people who regularly visit your home apart from those who live there?
- Are you in fear of the consequences of doing something, or not doing something?

Checking out

- ⇒ Do I know what other professionals are involved with this family?
- ⇒ Have other professionals observed what I have seen?
- ⇒ Are professionals being told the same or different things, or do explanations from family members change over time or according to who you ask?
- ⇒ Are other professionals concerned? If so, what action has been taken so far and is there anything else which should or could be done by me or anyone else?

SEE PAST THE OBVIOUS LOOK FURTHER, SEE MORE THINK WIDER, LOOK FOR THE SIGNS

For additional information: [West Midlands Safeguarding Children Procedures](#)

