

7 Minute Briefing: Professional Curiosity

Date: November 2023

7. TIPS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- Seek advice, guidance and second opinions.
- Work in partnership with other agencies.
- Carry out unplanned visits (where possible).
- Play 'devil's advocate.'
- Present alternative hypotheses.
- Present cases from the child, young person, adult or another family member's perspective.
- Share your concerns and findings with other professionals/agencies.
- Triangulate the information received from various sources to better understand the functioning of a family which, in turn, helps us to predict what may/is likely to happen in the future.
- Be willing to accept challenge as well as give it.

1. WHAT IS PROFESSIONAL CURIOSITY

Professional curiosity is having a healthy scepticism about what you are being told about a child.

It is a communication skill to explore and understand what is happening within a family rather than making assumptions or accepting service users' versions of events or disclosures at face value. This requires practitioners to practice 'respectful uncertainty'.

2. WHAT DOES BEING PROFESSIONALLY CURIOUS LOOK LIKE?

It's a combination of observing, listening, asking direct questions, checking out and reflecting on information received and not accepting it at face value. It means:

- testing out your professional assumptions about different types of families;
- seeing past the obvious;
- Considering what you see as well as what you're told. Are there any visual clues as to what life is like, or which don't triangulate with the information you already hold?
- Building authentic relationships with families and developing epistemic trust.



6. CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING

- Make sure you have empathy and hear the voice of the child.
- Make sure you "Think Family" and their environment – seek to understand the makeup of the household and the context of how children and young people spend their free time away from school.
- Make sure you feel confident to be courageous and aren't afraid to ask follow up questions.
- Make sure you know the factors that are barriers to professional curiosity and you take steps to reduce them.
- Make sure you think the unthinkable; believe the unbelievable.
- Challenge requires skill, subtlety, patience and time to be effective.
- Make sure you seek supervision or discuss / reflect with your manager – professionals require structure and support to build confidence and skills to communicate effectively and courageously.
- Make sure you understand your own responsibility and know when to act.

3. RESPECTFUL UNCERTAINTY AND DISGUISED COMPLIANCE

There is also a need to maintain an attitude of respectful uncertainty. This means applying a critical eye to the information given by a child's parents/carers, rather than just 'taking their word for it'.

Being alert to disguised compliance is vital; some parents and carers can give the impression of cooperation and openness, and therefore the opportunity to further question and raise concern is sometimes overlooked.

Recognise when someone is reluctant to provide a full or accurate account of events or is pretending to cooperate to avoid raising suspicions. Staff should verify and corroborate information with others.

5. BARRIERS TO PROFESSIONAL CURIOSITY

continued

- Time constraints.
- Lacking the confidence to ask sensitive questions.
- Unconscious bias - be aware of your own background, culture and beliefs and the impact this may have on the way you interpret a situation.

4. BARRIERS TO PROFESSIONAL CURIOSITY

- Overidentifying with parent/carers and losing focus on the child.
- Over optimism: **The rule of optimism** is also about professionals who do not want to acknowledge that things are not getting better and that they need to make hard decisions.
- Avoiding exploration of a family's racial culture and heritage and what this means for them specifically.
- Making assumptions or generalisations.
- Inability to revise assessments in light of new information, not keeping assessments 'dynamic.'
- Being afraid to raise concerns/question families.