

Spotlight on Professional Curiosity

Professional curiosity or professional nosiness.....?

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 called 'professional uncertainty' in case reviews.

Professional curiosity can require all practitioners to think 'outside the box', beyond their usual professional role, seeing past the obvious and consider families' circumstances holistically. Curious professionals engage with individuals and families through visits, conversations, observations and asking relevant questions to gather historical and current information. It is a combination of looking, listening, asking direct questions, checking out and reflecting on information received.

How did the term professional curiosity come about?

Professional curiosity in social work practice is not a new concept. It stemmed from the report into the death of Victoria Climbié at the age of nine in 2003. Lord Laming, the chair of the review, spoke of a 'lack of inquisitiveness' during professionals' visits to Victoria Climbié's home. He said:

"The concept of "respectful uncertainty" should lie at the heart of the relationship between the social worker and the family. It does not require social workers constantly to interrogate their clients, but it does involve the critical evaluation of information that they are given. People who abuse their children are unlikely to inform social workers of the fact. For this reason at least, social workers must keep an open mind. Their managers must also keep an open mind".

Although published over 20 years ago now, Lord Laming's comments are still so relevant today, and the lack of professional curiosity has since featured in other reviews, not just in deaths of children but adults.

Michael Preston-Shoot reported in 2017 on 26 serious case reviews relating to adults in the South West of England. He said "The quality of the relationship that can be built with the individual, through persistence in engagement and an understanding of their history, is a crucial element of safeguarding.

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Important too is practitioners' curiosity about the relationship dynamics between an individual and others in their household or network, with recognition of the power dynamics that might be at work, and about situations where individuals do not keep appointments. "Did not attend" could actually be "was not taken/brought".

Professional curiosity is needed when working with families who display 'disguised compliance'. This involves parents or carers giving the appearance of co-operating with agencies to avoid raising suspicions and reduce concerns. It can range from superficial co-operation to concealing deliberate abuse and can lead to delays in intervening in families.

What are the barriers to professional curiosity?

- Losing focus on the child or adult through over-identifying with carers;
- Over optimism that a situation is changing for the child or adult;
- Making assumptions based on what is being said;
- Being afraid to raise concerns;
- Time constraints;
- Lacking the confidence or assertiveness to ask sensitive questions;
- Unconscious bias; and
- Remote working and hot-desking can present challenges to practicing in a curious way, as talking with colleagues and discussing situations support reflective learning and practice change.

What supports professional curiosity?

It is important therefore that everyone takes time to think about how they can be enquiring in their contact with families in a way that keeps the door of engagement open. Professional curiosity is much more likely to flourish when practitioners:

- are supported by good quality training to help them develop;
- have access to good management, support and supervision. Agencies need to support the development of remote working strategies to enable and encourage case discussions and support across practitioners;
- 'walk in the shoes' (have empathy) of the child and/or adult to consider the situation from their lived experience;

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- remain diligent in working with the family and developing the professional relationships to understand what has happened and its impact on all family members;
- always try to see all parties separately; and
- focus on the needs, voice and 'lived experience' of the child, young person or adult.

And remember, there is no magic way of spotting disguised compliance other than the discrepancy between an adult or carer's accounts and observations of the needs and accounts of the child or adult. The latter must always take precedent.

Where can I learn more about professional curiosity?

- The Dartington Trust has published a [Research in Practice](#) briefing with lots of great practical advice about what we can all do to be more professionally curious
- Sue Woolmore talks about disguised compliance in this four-minute [video](#)
- Nottinghamshire Safeguarding Partnership encourage us to rethink 'did not attend' in this short [video](#)
- Read about disguised compliance in this short article in the [Community Care](#) magazine