



Safeguarding Partnership Board Practitioner Briefing

- Professional Curiosity / Opportunities to be curious

Professional curiosity or 'Opportunities to be curious' is an emerging theme in both Children and Adults Case Reviews and other reviews completed by Safeguarding Partnership Board, and this is reflected nationally. It has long been recognised as an important concept in practice with children and adults at risk.

What is professional curiosity / Opportunities to be curious

Professional curiosity / Opportunities to be curious is about exploring and understanding what is happening with children or adults at risk and their wider environment. It is about enquiring deeper and using proactive questioning and challenge. It also relates to understanding own responsibility and knowing when to act, rather than making assumptions or taking things at face value. In practice, opportunities to be curious is aligned to multi-agency working, collating information from different sources and applying different perspectives. This will lead to developing a better understanding of a child or adult at risk and the context their life is embedded in aiding a systematic analysis.

Key practice points:

- Look and Listen
- Ask and Act
- Check Out and Reflect
- Explore and Understand
- Anticipate but don't Presume or Assume
- Look Further and Enquire Deeper
- Remain Flexible and Open-Minded
- See the Whole Picture and Beyond the Obvious
- Think the Unthinkable and Believe the Unbelievable
- Think Professional Curiosity / Respectful Uncertainty and Challenge
- Use Evidence, Professional Judgement, Common Sense, Intuition and Gut Feelings



Barriers to professional curiosity / Opportunities to be curious

It is widely recognised that there are many barriers to being professionally curious. Practitioners must be aware of these barriers, which can include:

Disguised compliance is when people around children or adults at risk give the appearance of co-operating with agencies to avoid raising suspicions and allay concerns. Hostile or aggressive behaviour may also be a way to prevent practitioners from asking questions or probing more into situations. Some may simply not engage with practitioners to prevent challenge. Practitioners need to establish the facts and gather evidence about what is happening. Focussing on outcomes rather than processes helps to remain person-centred.

The ‘rule of optimism’ promoting positive risk taking is about a strength-based approach, but this does not mean that new or escalating risks should not be treated seriously. The ‘rule of optimism’ is a well-known dynamic in which professionals tend to rationalise away new or escalating risks despite clear evidence to the contrary.

Accumulating risk – seeing the whole picture Reviews repeatedly demonstrate that professionals tend to respond to each situation or new risk discretely, rather than assessing the new information within the context of the whole person, or looking at the cumulative effect of a series of incidents and information.

Normalisation refers to social processes through which ideas and actions come to be seen as ‘normal’ and become taken-for-granted or ‘natural’ in everyday life. Because they are seen as ‘normal’ they cease to be questioned and are therefore not recognised as potential risks or assessed as such.

Professional deference practitioners who have most contact with the person are in a good position to recognise when the risks to them are escalating. However, there can be a tendency to defer to the opinion of a more senior professional who has limited contact with the person but who can view the risk as less significant. **Be confident in your own judgement and always outline your observations and concerns to other professionals, be courageous and challenge their opinion of risk if it varies from your own.** Escalate ongoing concerns through your manager and use the Safeguarding Partnership Boards’ Escalation Policy

Confirmation bias this is when we look for evidence that support or confirm our own preconceived view and ignore contrary information that refutes them. It occurs when we filter out potentially useful facts and opinions that don't coincide with our perception.

‘Knowing but not knowing’ is about having a sense that something is not right but not knowing exactly what, so it is difficult to grasp the problem and take action.

Confidence in managing tension disagreement, disruption and aggression from families or others, can undermine confidence and divert meetings away from topics the practitioner wants to explore and back to the family’s own agenda. Training, supervision or peer/manager support in difficult situations can help to feel more in control.

Dealing with uncertainty questionable accounts, vague or withdrawn disclosures, deception and inconclusive medical evidence are common in safeguarding practice. Practitioners are often presented with concerns which are impossible to substantiate. In such situations, ‘there is a temptation to discount concerns that cannot be proved’.

A person-centred approach requires practitioners to remain mindful of the original concern and be professionally curious.

- ‘Unsubstantiated’ concerns and inconclusive medical evidence should not lead to case closure without further assessment
- Withdrawn allegations still need to be investigated wherever possible
- The use of risk assessment tools can reduce uncertainty, but they are not a substitute for professional judgement
- Social care practitioners are responsible for triangulating information such as, seeking independent confirmation of information and weighing up information from a range of sources, particularly when there are differing accounts and considering different theories and research to understand the situation

Other barriers to professional curiosity / opportunities to be curious

inadequate supervision, complexity and pressure of work, changes of practitioners leading to repeatedly 'starting again' in casework, closing cases too quickly, fixed thinking/preconceived ideas and values, and a lack of openness to new knowledge are also barriers to a professionally curious approach.

Developing skills in professional curiosity

- Be flexible and open-minded, not taking everything at face value. Check your own emotional state and attitudes. Leave time to prepare yourself for managing risk and uncertainty and processing the impact it has on you.
- ***Think the unthinkable; believe the unbelievable. Consider how you can articulate 'intuition' into an evidenced, professional view.***
- Use your communication skills: review records, record accurately, check facts and feedback to the people you are working with and for. Never assume and be wary of assumptions already made.
- Use case history and explore information from the person themselves, the family, friends and neighbours, as well as other professionals (triangulation).
- Pay as much attention to how people look and behave as to what they say.
- Actively seek full engagement. If you need more support to engage the person or their family, think about who in the network can help you. Consider calling a multiagency meeting to bring in support from colleagues in other agencies.
- Take responsibility for the safeguarding role you play, however large or small, in the life of the person in front of you.

Opportunities to be curious are likely to flourish when practitioners:

- Attend good quality training to help them develop
- Have access to good management support and supervision
- Have empathy ('walk in the shoes') of the person to consider the situation from their lived experience
- Remain diligent in working with the person and their family/network, developing professional relationships to understand what has happened and its impact on all involved
- Always try to see the person on their own
- Listen to people who speak on behalf of the person and who have important knowledge about them
- Be alert to those who prevent professionals from seeing or listening to the person
- Do not rely on the opinion of only one person, wherever possible access information from a variety of sources
- Have an analytical and reflective approach
- Develop the skills and knowledge to hold difficult conversations

Holding difficult conversations and challenging

Tackling disagreements or hostility, raising concerns or challenge, and giving information that will not be well received are recognised as hard things to do.

The following are some tips on how to have difficult conversations.

- Planning in advance to ensure there will be time to cover the essential elements of the conversation.

- Keeping the agenda focused on the topics you need to discuss. Being clear and unambiguous.
- Having courage and focusing on the needs of the service user.
- Being non-confrontational and non-blaming, and sticking to the facts.
- Having evidence to back up what you say. Ensuring decision-making is justifiable and transparent.
- Showing empathy, consideration and compassion – being real and honest.
- Demonstrating congruence ie making sure tone, body language and content of speech are consistent.
- Acknowledging ‘gut feelings’, sharing these with other professionals, and seeking evidence.
- Understanding the elements and indicators of behavioural change.
- Holding a healthy scepticism.
- Understanding the complexities of disguised compliance.
- Applying professional judgement.

Never be concerned about asking the obvious question, and share concerns with colleagues and managers. A ‘fresh pair of eyes’ looking at a case can help practitioners and organisations to maintain a clear focus on good practice and risk assessment and develop a critical mindset.

How managers can support professionally curious practice

Managers can maximise opportunities for professionally curious practice to flourish by:

- Playing ‘devil’s advocate’ – asking ‘what if?’ questions to challenge and support practitioners to think more widely around cases. Question whether outcomes have improved for the person and evidence for this.
- Present alternative hypotheses about what could be happening.
- Provide opportunities for group supervision which can help stimulate debate and curious questioning, and allow practitioners to learn from one another’s experiences. The issues considered in one case may be reflected in other cases for other team members.
- Present cases from the perspective of other family members or professionals.
- Ask practitioners what led them to arrive at their conclusion and support them to think through the evidence.
- Monitor workloads and encourage practitioners to talk about and support them to address issues of stress or pressure. Support practitioners to recognise when they are tired and need a fresh pair of eyes on a case.

Further Information

Resolving Professional Differences (Escalation) Policy

- For children: https://safeguardingcambspeterborough.org.uk/children-board/professionals/procedures/escalation_policy/
- For Adults: <https://safeguardingcambspeterborough.org.uk/adults-board/information-for-professionals/cpsabprocedures/adultescalation/>

Safeguarding Training: <https://safeguardingcambspeterborough.org.uk/availabletraining/>