

Professional Curiosity

Introduction

Professional curiosity is a crucial skill for safeguarding practitioners who work with children and adults at risk. It refers to the proactive approach taken by professionals to explore and understand the underlying factors and contexts of a situation, especially when it involves the safety and well-being of individuals, particularly children and vulnerable adults. It involves asking probing questions, seeking clarity, and not taking information at face value.

This briefing explains what professional curiosity is, why it is important, how it can be applied in practice, and how safeguarding professionals can enhance their approach to it.

Understanding Professional Curiosity

Professional curiosity involves looking beyond the initial presentation of a situation to consider what else might be occurring. It means noticing discrepancies, seeking clarification, and being ready to challenge explanations that do not align with other available information. In safeguarding contexts, professional curiosity is essential in identifying and preventing harm, especially when individuals may not disclose their circumstances due to fear, shame, or coercion.

This curiosity must be grounded in respect and empathy, exercised with a strong understanding of diversity and cultural literacy. It is about developing a comprehensive understanding of a person's lived experience and being prepared to act on concerns, even when evidence is not immediately clear or when others may minimize the issues.

Why Professional Curiosity Matters in Safeguarding

A curious mindset helps in identifying potential risks and safeguarding concerns that might otherwise be overlooked. By maintaining an inquisitive and open-minded attitude, professionals can better protect those at risk, ensuring that all aspects of their circumstances are considered and addressed comprehensively. This approach is crucial in creating a culture of vigilance and responsiveness in safeguarding practices.

Being professionally curious enables practitioners to:

- Identify disguised compliance, where individuals appear cooperative to avoid scrutiny.
- Understand the dynamics of coercive control and the reasons behind non-disclosure.
- Recognise cumulative harm from patterns of neglect or abuse.
- Ensure that safeguarding assessments are thorough, balanced, and evidence-based.

Without curiosity, professionals risk missing critical warning signs or inadvertently colluding with those causing harm.

Barriers to Professional Curiosity

There are several factors that may prevent professionals from exercising curiosity. These include high caseloads and time pressures, which can limit opportunities for reflection.

Assumptions based on stereotypes, prior knowledge of a family, or over-familiarity with a case can lead to complacency. Additionally, organisational cultures that discourage questioning or where challenge is not welcomed may suppress curiosity.

Practitioners may also fear that asking certain questions could be perceived as intrusive or culturally insensitive. However, these fears can be managed through skilled, respectful communication and by developing cultural humility and awareness.

A key part of overcoming these barriers lies in supervision, team support, and reflective practice.

Applying Professional Curiosity in Practice

- Being professionally curious involves a set of practical skills and a mindset that can be developed through training and supported in supervision.
- Practitioners should aim to ask open-ended questions that encourage fuller disclosure, such as "Can you help me understand what a typical day looks like for you?" or "What do you think is going well, and what is worrying you right now?".
- Triangulating information by speaking with multiple sources – such as family members, schools, health professionals, and community services – can provide a more accurate picture.
- It is also important to consider what is not being said or shown. For example, are children always asleep or not present during visits? Are there inconsistencies between verbal accounts and observed conditions? Such details can offer vital clues to underlying concerns.
- Professionals should continually ask themselves, "What might I be missing?" and consider the impact of their own biases or blind spots. Using reflective supervision to explore these questions in a safe environment is crucial to sustaining curiosity over time.

Creating a Culture of Curiosity

Professional curiosity thrives in environments where it is encouraged and modelled. Leaders and managers play a key role in setting expectations for curiosity and in creating a culture where questions are welcomed and the challenge is constructive. Supervision should not only review compliance with processes but also encourage critical thinking and reflection.

Organisations can support this through regular reflective practice sessions, case learning reviews, and policies that emphasise the importance of curiosity. Multi-agency collaboration is another essential component, ensuring that professionals from different backgrounds share information and perspectives to form a more holistic understanding of risk.