



Protecting People Angus

Strategic Committee

Angus Child Protection Committee

Practitioner's Guide: Professional Curiosity

October 2024

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If you are worried or concerned about a child or young person, you should contact your Children & Families Locality Duty Team or Police Scotland:

Arbroath, Carnoustie & Monifieth	01241 465595
Forfar & Kirriemuir	01307 491850
Brechin & Montrose	01674 907611
Police Scotland Non-Emergency Number	101
In an Emergency	Call 999

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Introduction

This guidance has been developed to provide all practitioners and managers with clear practice guidance on how to be professionally curious and alert when working with children, young people and their families.

The protection of children and young people is **everyone's job and everyone's responsibility**. We consider this to be a shared responsibility for all practitioners and managers working across the public, private and third sectors. It is essential that **everyone** understands the contribution they have to make in **keeping children and young people safe** and **protected from harm and abuse**.

This guidance should complement, not replace, any existing service or agency guidance on professional curiosity. Guidance alone cannot protect children and young people; but a competent, confident, curious and skilful workforce working together with a vigilant public, can.

Context

All children and young people (including unborn babies) have the right to be cared for; protected from harm and abuse and to grow up in a safe environment, in which their rights are respected and all their needs are met.

Children and young people should **get the help they need, when they need it, for as long as they need it**. They should also **get the right help, at the right time, from the right people** and their welfare is always paramount.

Most children and young people get all the help and support they need from their parents, carers and families; in addition to the universal services of education and health. However, on some occasions, some children and young people may need further help and support in order to **safeguard, support** and **promote** their **wellbeing** and to protect them from harm and abuse.

Professional curiosity has been a recurring theme in Learning Reviews over many years, both nationally and locally. These have identified, that by recognising and responding to presenting issues in isolation and with a lack of professional curiosity, may lead to missed opportunities to intervene, miss less obvious indicators of vulnerability or significant harm, and in the worst circumstances result in death or significant harm. However, it is important to note that when a lack of professional curiosity is cited as a factor in a tragic incident or event, it does not automatically mean that blame should be apportioned.

Whilst professional curiosity has long been a working concept in children's services, it equally applies to adult services and those working with vulnerable adults and / or adults at risk of harm.

The child or young person's safety and wellbeing must be the paramount consideration at all times.

What is Professional Curiosity?

Professional curiosity is a combination of **looking; listening; asking direct questions; checking out** and **reflecting** on information received.

Professional curiosity is exploring and understanding what is happening with a child, young person and their family, enquiring deeper and using proactive questioning and challenge. There is a need to understand one's own professional responsibility and knowing when to act, rather than making assumptions, or taking things at face value.

Professional curiosity means not taking a single source of information and accepting it at face value. 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 what appears to be obvious and is about respectful scepticism and challenge.

Professional curiosity is not a new approach and does not mean extra work if you are doing your job well. But if you currently apply a 'tick box' approach to investigations, assessments and planning; and in your contact with children, young people and their families, then it will take you more time to be curious and ask questions, and to check out what you are told with other family members and other professionals.

Professional curiosity is not always easy and straightforward, especially with parents, carers and family who demonstrate disguised non-compliance or coercive control. Families can appear to be engaging with practitioners, but may not always be able or willing to change as a result of an agency intervention / support. Some family members may be unable, through fear or uncertainty, to be open and honest about the family dynamics. It is with these families that practitioners need to exercise the most curiosity.

Key Practice Points:

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



Barriers to Professional Curiosity

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

Disguised Non-Compliance

A parent, carer or family member gives the appearance of co-operating to avoid raising suspicions, to allay professional concerns and ultimately to reduce professional involvement. Hostile or aggressive behaviour may also be a way to prevent workers from asking questions or probing more fully into situations. Practitioners need to establish the facts and gather evidence about what is happening and what might be influencing the behaviours being displayed. Focussing on outcomes rather than processes helps Practitioners to remain child-centred and focussed.

The “Rule of Optimism”

Risk enablement is about a strengths-based practice approach, but this does not mean that new, emerging or escalating risks should not be treated seriously. The “Rule of optimism” is a well-known dynamic in which Practitioners can tend to be over-optimistic about outcomes for children, young people and families in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary. Practitioners need to be alert to this evolving dynamic.

Accumulating / Escalating Risk

Practitioners tend to respond to each incident/event/new risk discretely and in isolation, rather than assessing the new information holistically within the context of the whole child or young person; or looking at the cumulative effect of a series of incidents and historic events. This is where a [chronology](#) can be a key tool alongside supervision and reflection on the situation in its entirety.

Normalisation

This 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. Such normalisation can occur when practitioners become inured to poor home conditions, for example, through regular exposure to such conditions in the course of their work.

Professional Deference

Practitioners who have most contact with a child, young person and their family are in a strong position to recognise when the risks to a child or young person are escalating. However, there can be a tendency to defer to the opinion of a “higher status” professional, who has limited contact with a child or young person, but who views the risk as less significant. Practitioners must be confident in their own judgement and always outline their observations and concerns to other professionals, be courageous and challenge their opinion of risk if it varies from their own. Practitioners should always escalate ongoing concerns quickly through their own Line Management / Supervision arrangements.

Confirmation Bias

This is when Practitioners unconsciously look for evidence that supports or confirms their pre-held view. It occurs when Practitioners filter out salient facts and opinions that don't coincide with their own preconceived ideas and give higher status to the facts and opinions which do.

'Knowing but not Knowing'

This is about having a sense that something is not right but not knowing exactly what, so it is difficult to grasp the problem or take action and is underpinned by intuition and gut feeling. Supervision, reflection and case discussion with a colleague can be useful in these scenarios, to discuss where these feelings are coming from and begin to look at what further information is needed.

Confidence in Managing Tension

Disagreement, disruption and aggression from children, young people, their families or others, can undermine Practitioner confidence and divert meetings away from topics the Practitioner wants to explore and back to the family's own agenda.

Dealing with Uncertainty

Contested accounts; vague or retracted disclosures; deception and inconclusive medical evidence are common in child protection 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 rather than to sit with uncertainty.

Other Barriers to Professional Curiosity

This can include:

- a lack of and/or poor supervision;
- case complexity;
- pressure of work;
- workers stress;
- inability to be curious;
- changes of case worker leading to repeatedly "*starting again syndrome*" in casework;
- closing cases too quickly;
- fixed thinking/ preconceived ideas, values and a lack of openness to new knowledge.

Courageous and Difficult Conversations and Professional Curiosity

Tackling disputes, disagreements, hostility, raising concerns, challenging, 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 courageous and difficult conversations with children, young people and their families:

- plan in advance to ensure there will be time to cover the essential elements of the conversation;
- keep the agenda focused on the topics that need to be discussed and be clear, open and unambiguous;
- have courage and focus on the needs of the child or young person;
- be non-confrontational, non-blaming and stick to the known facts;
- have evidence to back up what is said and ensure decision-making is justifiable/transparent;
- show empathy, consideration and compassion – be real and honest;
- demonstrate congruence i.e. making sure tone, body language and content of speech are consistent;
- acknowledge intuition and “*gut feelings*”; sharing these with others and seeking evidence;
- understand the elements and indicators of behavioural change;
- hold onto a healthy scepticism;
- understand the complexities of disguised non-compliance; and
- apply professional judgement and adopt a common-sense approach.

Practitioners should never be worried or concerned about asking the obvious question, and always 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; the shared assessment of risks and needs; effective multi-agency planning and to develop a critical mindset.

Authoritative Practice, Supervision and Professional Curiosity

An important aspect of authoritative practice and professional curiosity is that every Practitioner “*takes responsibility for their role in the child protection process*”.

This needs to be underpinned by a culture and ethos of supportive and robust supervision/case discussion. All Heads of Service and Managers have a responsibility to foster such culture and should model authoritative practice and professional curiosity by their own leadership. This allows opportunities to question, explore and gain a better understanding of a case.

Supervision, reflective practice and group discussions can be effective in promoting professional curiosity and safe uncertainty, where Practitioners can use these spaces to think about their own judgements and observations of a child, young person and their family. It also allows Teams to learn from one another’s experiences and the issues considered in one case may have echoes in other cases.

Line Managers/Supervisors/colleagues can maximise opportunities for professional curiosity, to flourish, by:

- playing “devil’s advocate” – asking the “what if?” and “so what?” questions to challenge and support Practitioners to think more widely around cases;
- questioning whether outcomes have improved for the child or young person and confirm what the evidence is for this;
- presenting alternative hypotheses about what could be happening;
- providing opportunities for group discussions which can help stimulate debate and curious questioning;
- presenting cases from the perspective of other family members or Practitioners;
- asking practitioners what led them to arrive at their conclusion and support them to think through the evidence;
- monitoring workloads and encourage Practitioners to talk about and support them to address issues of stress or pressure;
- supporting Practitioners to recognise when they are tired and need a fresh pair of eyes on a case.

Interagency Disagreements

In the event of professional disagreement or difference of opinion with a worker from another agency relating to a referral, assessment or content of a child’s plan, the following should be considered as a means of resolution:

- Convene a professional workers’ meeting to explore the areas of disagreement with a view to coming to a consensus.
- Discuss the matter with your line manager to agree next steps. This may include escalating the concerns to Senior Managers within the respective agencies to discuss and agree on a resolution.

In cases where a child may be at risk of harm, any agency can call a Child Protection Planning Meeting or, if compulsory measures of supervision are required, make a referral to the Scottish Children’s Reporter Administration. If there remains disagreement about the level of risk to a child or young person, the above should be discussed with your line manager and a course of action agreed.

Supporting Information

National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021 - updated 2023

[LINK](#)

eLearning

[LINK](#)

Professional Curiosity Video

[Professional Curiosity with introduction \(youtube.com\)](#) (video with intro 27min)

Understanding disguised non-compliance in social work - Insight 66

<https://www.iriss.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-09/insights-66.pdf>

