

What is Professional Curiosity?

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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.

It involves a combination of looking, listening, asking direct questions, checking out and reflecting on information received, and verifying with external sources such as other professionals.

Professional curiosity has been described as the need for practitioners to practice 'respectful uncertainty' – applying critical evaluation to any information they receive and maintaining an open mind.



**Diogelu Gwent
Gwent Safeguarding**

Professional Curiosity

Why is Professional Curiosity Important?

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Child and Adult Practice Reviews repeatedly highlight the importance of professional curiosity and not accepting things at face value. Key cases where a lack of professional curiosity have been a feature include the tragic deaths of Victoria Climbié (2000) and Daniel Pelka (2012). More recently professional curiosity features frequently in the National Independent Safeguarding Board (NISB) thematic analysis of 33 child practice reviews that were undertaken by the six Regional Children's Safeguarding Boards in Wales between 2013 and 2021.

Whilst it is entirely credible that families are being honest in their accounts, it is also possible that parents and carers go to extreme lengths to disguise abuse and neglect and to present as being compliant with services. A failure to employ professional curiosity can lead to missed opportunities to identify risk factors and relying on incorrect assumptions may mean that the correct interventions or support are not put in place. It is important to maintain professional curiosity throughout the process of working with a family and to continuously review risks.

Resources

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[Professional Curiosity: A Video Guide - YouTube](#)

[Risk, Response and Review: Multi-Agency Safeguarding - Safeguarding Board Wales](#)

[Ten pitfalls and how to avoid them: What research tell us \(manchester.ac.uk\)](#)

[Disguised compliance – Safeguarding Network](#)

[2019-11-08 15626 Burton.pdf](#)

[How Children Become Invisible in Child Protection Work: Findings from Research into Day-to-Day Social Work Practice | The British Journal of Social Work | Oxford Academic \(oup.com\)](#)



What are the Barriers to Professional Curiosity?

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- A hostile or reactive organisational culture, which often increases in risk aversion.
- Proceduralisation and a move away from the 'caring,' element of the profession
- Supervision processes which are task focussed and fail to support reflective practice.
- Losing focus on the needs of the child or adult at risk through over-identifying with parents or carers.
- Over optimism or complacency, particularly when working with a family over a long period of time.
- Relying on assumptions.
- Reluctance or lacking confidence to question or challenge families/carers.
- Confirmation bias – when we only consider evidence that supports our assumptions and ignore information to the contrary.

Professional deference – deferring to somebody with seniority even though

What can PRACTITIONERS do?

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Look – are you observing any behaviour indicative of harm, abuse, or neglect.

Listen – Are you hearing the voice of the child or adult at risk?

- Ask** – are there any direct questions that could elicit more information? Also consider the use of open, conversational questions to discuss difficult topics.
- Check out** – are other professionals involved and are they being told or seeing the same thing? Do they have any concerns or contrary information?
- Use **supervision** as an opportunity to reflect and challenge your thinking.
- Be flexible, open minded, and avoid assumption or taking things at face value
- Be self-aware in practice and ensure good triangulation of information.
- Be prepared to think the unthinkable
- Avoid cutting short or missing appointments.
- Record and share information as promptly as possible.
- Avoid normalising concerns just because they may occur frequently.
- Avoid looking at information in isolation; consider family history and the whole picture.

How can MANAGERS support professional curiosity?

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One of the most important things a manager can do to support professional curiosity is to offer reflective and meaningful **supervision** and to use supervision as an opportunity to encourage practitioners to challenge their thinking in a supportive environment.

- Playing Devil's Advocate and asking the 'what if?' questions in order to challenge and support practitioners.
- Present alternative hypotheses as to what could be happening.
- Provide opportunities for group/peer supervision to encourage debate and discussion.
- Present cases from the perspectives of other family members or professionals
- Monitor workloads and stresses and encourage practitioners to recognise when a fresh pair of eyes are needed.
- Promote opportunities for reflective practice and training relating to professional curiosity.

ORGANISATIONAL Responsibilities

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Organisational culture is a vital element of a professionally curious workforce, and it is important that organisations allow the time and capacity for staff to be professionally curious. It requires an open and transparent structure with opportunities for reflective supervision.

Stretched services and an increase in risk aversion can create hostile and reactive cultures which are not conducive to professional curiosity. Organisations must acknowledge the emotional demands of work with children, families, and adults at risk and the tensions that this can cause for staff. It is important that practitioners are given the time and space to prepare for their interactions with individuals and families and to reflect and debrief after appointments. Long, fast paced, working hours can act as a barrier to this for many staff.

A culture which values the input of its service users is also an important factor in enhancing professionally curious practice and an understanding of the needs of those you are working with.