



NWSCB Practice Guidance
Professional Curiosity

1.0. Professional Curiosity

- 1.1. 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.
- 1.2. This 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. In safeguarding the term 'safe uncertainty' is used to describe an approach which is focused on safety but that takes into account changing information, different perspectives and acknowledges that certainty may not be achievable.
- 1.3. Professional curiosity can require practitioners to:
 - think 'outside the box', beyond their usual professional role, and consider families' circumstances holistically
 - Show a real willingness to engage with children, adults and their families or carers.
- 1.4. Much has been written about the importance of curiosity during home visits and the need for authentic, close relationships of the kind where we see, hear and touch the truth of their experience of 'daily life' and are able to act on it and to achieve similar closeness with parents or carers.
- 1.5. Practitioners will often come into contact with a child, young person, adult or their family when they are in crisis or vulnerable to harm. These interactions present crucial opportunities for protection. Responding to these opportunities requires the ability to recognise (or see the signs of) vulnerabilities and potential or actual risks of harm, maintaining an open stance of professional curiosity (or enquiring deeper), and understanding one's own responsibility and knowing how to take action.
- 1.6. Children in particular, but also some adults, rarely disclose abuse and neglect directly to practitioners and, if they do, it will often be through unusual behaviour or comments. This makes identifying abuse and neglect difficult for professionals across agencies. We know that it is better to help as early as possible, before issues get worse. That means that all agencies and practitioners need to work together – the first step is to be professionally curious.
- 1.7. Curious professionals will spend time engaging with families on visits. They will know that talk, play and touch can all be important to observe and consider. Do not presume you know what is happening in the family home – ask questions and seek clarity if you are not certain. Do not be afraid to ask questions of families, and do so in an open way so they know that you are asking to keep the child or adult safe, not to judge or criticise. Be open to the unexpected, and incorporate information that does not support your initial

assumptions into your assessment of what life is like for the child or adult in the family.

2.0. Thinking the unthinkable

2.1. Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility and where practitioners are concerned each and every agency has a role to play in safeguarding children and adults.

2.2. The following factors highlight the need for all of us to strive to improve professional curiosity and professional courage:

- the views and feelings of children and some adults are actually very difficult to ascertain
- practitioners do not always listen to adults who tried to speak on behalf of a child or another adult and who may have important information to contribute
- parents or carers can easily prevent practitioners from seeing and listening to a child or another adult
- practitioners can be fooled with stories we want to believe are true
- effective multi-agency work needs to be coordinated
- Challenging parents or carers (and colleagues) requires expertise, confidence, time and a considerable amount of emotional energy.

3.0. Communication – the key to Good Multi Agency Practice

Top tips:

Listen:

- speak to other practitioners on a regular basis – don't wait for meetings
- when assessing and managing a case, input from two, three or four sources is better than one
- Sometimes the most important relationship to trust is yourself – if you feel there is a risk that is not being managed and no one is hearing you what do you do, how do you escalate this?
- try to be flexible with meetings to fit around all involved practitioners availability
- don't use jargon – talk to colleagues and families using language they understand and relate to
- include families in decisions about their own lives
- be mindful of personal optimistic bias (wishful thinking) when reviewing the families' progress
- make sure care plans are multi-agency and SMARTER
- self-assessments tools can promote honest discussion
- team managers should attend training for providing effective supervision and reflective practice in managing safeguarding
- Use quality assurance and audit framework such as quality standards to review case records to support good practice that keeps children safe and aids staff continuous professional development (CPD).

Information sharing:

- to support good communication, a formal information sharing arrangement should be in place between all agencies with the purpose and content about requesting and sharing information explicitly agreed
- fears about jeopardising the relationship with the family should not be a barrier to the sharing of information principles from 'the seven golden rules for information sharing' should be followed information should be shared in a timely manner and the family included where it does not increase risk
- all involved agencies should be given ample notice when invited to case review meetings to enable them to provide reports and feedback to contribute to ongoing assessment and review of family progress
- A group of practitioners should maintain contact with each other and make the times of meetings flexible to enable optimal attendance of practitioners.

4.0. Difficult Conversations with Parents/ Carers

4.1. Four factors to consider when preparing for a difficult conversation with a parent or carer are:

1. Principles – that underpin safeguarding children
2. Planning – how to plan or be prepared
3. The conversation – things to consider when having a conversation
4. Examples – open questions and suggestions.

5.0. Professional Curiosity and Culturally Competent Safeguarding Practice

5.1. It is important therefore that practitioners are sensitive to differing family patterns and lifestyles and to child rearing and caring patterns that vary across different racial, ethnic and cultural groups. At the same time they must be clear that child or adult abuse cannot be condoned for religious or cultural reasons.

5.2. All practitioners working with children, young people, vulnerable adults and their parents, carers or families whose faith, culture, nationality and possibly recent history differs significantly from that of the majority culture, must be professionally curious and take personal responsibility for informing their work with sufficient knowledge (or seeking advice) on the particular culture and/or faith by which the child, young person, adult and their family or carers lives their daily life.

5.3. Practitioners should be curious about situations or information arising in the course of their work, allowing the family to give their account as well as researching such things by discussion with other practitioners, or by researching the evidence base. Examples of this might be around attitudes towards, and acceptance of, services e.g. health; dietary choices; education provision or school attendance.

- 5.4. In some instances reluctance to access support stems from a desire to keep family life private. In many communities there is a prevalent fear that social work practitioners will ‘take your children away’. There may be a poor view of support services arising from initial contact through the immigration system, and, for some communities – particularly those with insecure immigration status – an instinctive distrust of the state arising from experiences in their country of origin.
- 5.5. Practitioners must take personal responsibility for utilising specialist services’ knowledge. Knowing about and using services available locally to provide relevant cultural and faith-related input to prevention, support and rehabilitation services for the child, young people or adults (and their family) will support practice.
- 5.6. This includes:
- knowing which agencies are available to access
 - having contact details to hand
 - Timing requests for expert support and information appropriately to ensure that assessments, care planning and review are sound and holistic.

6.0. Supervision Curiosity and Safeguarding Practice

- 6.1. For many agencies, the use of effective supervision is a means of improving decision-making, accountability, and supporting professional development among practitioners. Supervision is also an opportunity to question and explore an understanding of a case.
- 6.2. Group supervision and Reflective Practice Groups can be even more effective in promoting curiosity and safe uncertainty, as practitioners can use these spaces to think about their own judgments and observations. It also allows teams to learn from one another’s experiences, and the issues considered in one case may have echoes in other workloads.

Tips for practice:

- play ‘devil’s advocate’
- present alternative hypotheses
- Present cases from the child, young person, adult or another family member’s perspective.

7.0. Care Settings and Professional Curiosity

- 7.1. Care setting practitioners are perhaps best placed to notice how adults or children are because they have contact with the same adult or child on a regular basis. Practitioners can see changes in appearance, behaviour, alertness or appetite and provide a degree of monitoring of the adult or child’s welfare; in effect, they can be the ‘eyes’ for other professionals working with them.

- 7.2. This will also apply to volunteers and workers who run groups and clubs for children, young people or adults.
- 7.3. There are many examples of good practice in care staff were alert to concerns and were able to demonstrate professional curiosity and awareness of possible maltreatment and cumulative risk.
- 7.4. Being professionally curious enables practitioners to challenge carers or parents and an adult or child's vulnerability or risk while maintaining an objective, professional and supportive manner. This is not an easy balance.

8.0. Domestic Abuse and Professional Curiosity

- 8.1. Many Domestic Homicide Reviews and Child Practice Reviews refer to a lack of professional curiosity or respectful uncertainty. Practitioners need to demonstrate a non-discriminatory approach and explore the issues to formulate judgments that translate into effective actions in their dealings with families.
- 8.2. In particular it is vital that professionals understand the complexity of domestic abuse and are curious about what is happening in the child, adult and perpetrator's life.
- 8.3. 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
 - 'walk in the shoes' (have empathy) of the child and/or adult to consider the situation from their lived experience
 - 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.
- 8.4. Working with families where there is domestic violence & abuse can be very challenging and practitioners should not take everything they are told at face value. This is particularly so when a victim is not being seen alone and we should also be alert to the following behaviours which should provoke our professional curiosity:
 - the victim waits for her/his partner to speak first
 - the victim glances at her/his partner each time they speak, checking her/his reaction
 - the victim smooths over any conflict
 - the suspected perpetrator speaks for most of the time
 - the suspected perpetrator sends clear signals to the victim, by eye/body movement, facial expression or verbally, to warn them
 - The suspected perpetrator has a range of complaints about the victim, which they do not defend.

8.5. If these signals are present, the practitioner should find a way of seeing the suspected victim alone. Practitioners must be mindful to the needs of young people who may be experiencing inequality and/or violence in their relationships. Practitioners, however curious, cannot protect children and adults by working in isolation. Domestic abuse requires a multi-agency response and families and communities also have a vital role to play in protecting children and adults.

9.0. Education and Professional Curiosity

9.1. Education staff are perhaps best placed to notice how children and young people are because they have contact with them on an almost daily basis. School staff can see changes – such as in appearance, behaviour, alertness or appetite – and provide a degree of monitoring of the child’s welfare; in effect, they can be the ‘eyes’ for other practitioners working with the young person.

9.2. There are many examples of good practice in education where staff were alert to concerns and were able to demonstrate professional curiosity and awareness of possible maltreatment and cumulative risk.

9.3. Being professionally curious enables practitioners to challenge parents and explore a child’s vulnerability or risk while maintaining an objective, professional and supportive manner. This is not an easy balance.

9.4. It can be difficult for children to express concerns about their own wellbeing, so practitioners have a responsibility to create an environment in which they can do so. Schools should be careful of ‘organisational deafness’ which minimises the chances of really hearing what young people are saying, for example in relation to concerns about their friends.

9.5. Professionals (particularly school staff) should be curious and give sufficient credence to occasions when information is shared by young people.

10.0. Health Practitioners and Professional Curiosity

10.1 Authoritative practice and professional curiosity are vital in responding to the often highly complex cases that are characteristic of Reviews, where multiple risks and vulnerabilities may extend over considerable periods of time.

10.2. An important aspect of authoritative practice is that every practitioner ‘takes responsibility for their role in the safeguarding processes. Authoritative practice needs to be underpinned by a culture of supportive supervision and service leads and managers have a responsibility to foster such cultures and model authoritative practice in their own leadership by:

- encouraging all health practitioners to take responsibility for their role in safeguarding process, while respecting and valuing the role of others
- allowing practitioners to exercise their professional judgement in the light of the circumstances of a particular case

- Encouraging a stance of professional curiosity and challenge from a supportive base.

10.3. Tips for health professionals to **Be Curious!**

- know who the named professionals are for your area and that you fully understand their roles – promoting good professional practice and providing advice and expertise for fellow professionals
- ensure that safeguarding is addressed within your clinical supervision
- be aware of the relevant section in the Wales safeguarding procedures
- be aware of the need to always have ‘professional curiosity’
- be prepared to be both challenged and challenging within your own professional sphere
- Ensure you know how to escalate safeguarding concerns.

11.0. Police and Criminal Justice Agencies and Professional Curiosity

11.1 Developing and maintaining an open stance of professional curiosity supports police (and other staff) to consider the possibility of maltreatment, and to challenge and explore issues while maintaining an objective and supportive approach.

11.2. Given that criminal justice agencies often deal with specific incidents, supervising individual offenders or investigating stand-alone crimes, there is a risk of seeing an individual or a family only through one lens. Protecting children, young people or vulnerable adults involves understanding their lives and experiences and making professional judgments.

11.3. Children, young people or adults are unlikely to readily disclose abuse or neglect, this means practitioners have to be able to spot the signs and create a suitably safe and trusting listening environment.

11.4. There are examples of police and other professionals focusing on offender’s behaviours and not their underlying vulnerabilities.

11.5. Children or Adults repeatedly going missing should trigger police officers’ professional curiosity, it is vital to consider what is motivating their behaviour.

11.6. Practitioners and managers need to be curious, to be sceptical, to think critically and systematically but to act compassionately.