

CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS A PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE



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WHAT IS PROFESSIONAL CURIOSITY?

Professional Curiosity is the capacity to explore and understand what is happening for a person, rather than making assumptions or accepting things at face value.

This could be described as the need to practice 'respectful uncertainty' - applying critical evaluation and curiosity to information received and maintaining an open mind, thinking the unthinkable. Using respectful uncertainty can support us to reflect on information received and the impact on children and young people when accounts differ between parents/carers and professionals, where information changes regularly, and where opinions and interpretations differ.

Being professionally curious can mean thinking outside the box, beyond the limitations of professional roles, and considering the holistic needs of children, young people, and their families. It requires professionals to use their skills to look, listen, ask direct questions, and hold difficult or challenging conversations.

Professional Curiosity and challenge are a fundamental aspect of working together to keep children safe from harm. This approach helps us to fully understand the lived experiences of children and young people and ensures the right information is gathered and shared in order to identify, assess and intervene where risks are identified, especially those that may not be immediately obvious.

Being more curious as professionals and 'digging deeper' into areas where there is little or no information will help to inform assessments and empower professionals to influence key moments of decision making to reduce risks and improve outcomes for children and young people.

Remember that children rarely disclose abuse or neglect directly and will often show concerns through their behaviour or passing comments, making it difficult to identify abuse and neglect. Often the first steps to getting the right support, in the right place, at the right time for children and young people starts with professionals being curious.

Do not presume you know what is happening - ask questions, seek clarity, do not judge or criticise, be open to the unexpected, and willing to change your hypothesis.

A guide to professional curiosity and a 7-minute briefing can be found on the CPC's [website](#)

[Disguised Compliance](#)

WHY DO WE NEED TO BE MORE CURIOUS IN CHILD PROTECTION WORK?



To understand the full picture

To ensure that nothing is missed

To improve outcomes for children and young people

To improve practice

To identify disguised compliance

To share information effectively

To improve assessments

To identify concerns as early as possible

To plan meaningful and effective interventions

CHILD PROTECTION IS EVERYONE'S (MY) RESPONSIBILITY

Child Protection is everyone's responsibility and each and every professional has a role to play in protecting children and young people.

Any professional, in any agency, may need to have a difficult conversation with parents/carers before deciding what to do next.

- Once you have had a conversation or a series of discussions with the parent or carer, you may need to consider what actions, if any, you need to take. Consider the following:
- Professional curiosity – have you confirmed the response you have received with other agencies?
- Trust your instincts – you have spoken to the parent/carers and you know the child - trust your instincts if you still have concerns.
- If you feel it's too risky to speak to parents before speaking to social work, then don't.
- Do not put a child or yourself at risk, if
 - Parents could destroy evidence or hinder a police investigation, or,
 - It is possible the child could be silenced.
- Professionals should take responsibility for their concerns and it's good practice to discuss concerns with parents/carers and tell them you are going to make a referral, if that is the case. It is not appropriate to pass the buck and expect another professional to have the challenging conversation on your behalf.
- Follow [Edinburgh and the Lothians Multi-agency Child Protection Procedures](#)
- Know how to escalate concerns if you are unhappy with the response you receive from a core agency. You can find West Lothian Child Protection Committee's Escalation procedure [here](#)

TIPS FOR HAVING CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS

Open discussions with parents and carers when there are concerns about a child often provoke anxiety for professionals. However, professional challenge is part of good safeguarding and child protection practice.

The information in this guide is not exhaustive and it should be used as a reference tool alongside professionals' own policies, procedures, and practices and in conjunction with appropriate support and supervision.

Here are some things to avoid:

- Skirting around the issue
- Being personal
- Talking at people
- Being prescriptive
- Using jargon
- Being patronising
- Interrupting
- Using negative language
- Stating your opinions as fact

1. Have the conversation as soon as possible

Putting off difficult conversations can leave children in risky situations and raise professionals' anxiety around the conversation itself. If you feel it's too risky to speak to parents before speaking to/referring to social work, then don't.

2. Decide on the goals of the conversation

Consider the key points you want to communicate and be heard. Think about what you might say and how you might say it. Keep your ideas simple. Adapt your style to the parent; consider language barriers or learning difficulties.

3. Choose an appropriate location

Somewhere confidential. Avoid triggering parents' anxieties e.g. a head teacher's office may bring back childhood anxieties. Consider timing. Consider your own safety.

4. Identify strengths

Think about the strengths the person has that you might highlight in this conversation and have some ideas about how they might draw on these strengths to move through and beyond the difficult conversation.

5. Be empathetic

Acknowledge feelings as they arise. Allow their expression without judgment. Imagine what it's like to be in this person's shoes. Respond accordingly. Allow space for silence so emotions can be expressed.

6. Explain the nature of your concern

Use tact and diplomacy but be direct. Use plain language, not jargon. Use factual information "Jodie was not brought for the last two appointments; can you tell me why?"

7. Ask questions and actively listen

This will help you get a better understanding of the parents/carers' perspective – remain open to the other person's view and interpretation of the situation. Clarify uncertainties to avoid misinterpretation.

8. Body language

Be aware of body language - sometimes how our bodies respond can tell a different story to the words we are using

9. Trust your instincts

You have spoken to the parent/carer - trust your instincts if you still have concerns. Check with other agencies. Discuss in supervision. Refer to a core agency.

10. Manage your own emotions

Your emotions are valid but you may need to manage them to avoid things escalating. Don't argue, interrupt, pass judgement, jump to conclusions or let the parent's emotions affect you.

EXAMPLES

Paul has been really tired today and told me he isn't sleeping well, is there anything going on that might be worrying him?

'I need to talk to you about the injury to Jane's face; can you tell me what happened?'

Is there a reason why.....?
Can we talk about.....?
Johnny said.....
Today a member of staff saw....
Can you tell me about.....?
Do you know how...?

Avoid excessive reassurance – everything might not be alright.

CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS WITH PROFESSIONALS

Debate is healthy!

Having different professional perspectives within child protection practice is a sign of a healthy and well-functioning partnership. These differences of opinion can usually be resolved via discussion and negotiation between the professionals concerned.

It is essential that where differences of opinion arise they do not adversely affect the outcomes for children and young people and are resolved in a constructive and timely manner.

Differences could arise in a number of areas of multi-agency working as well as within single agency working. They are most likely to arise in relation to:

- Thresholds
- Outcomes of assessments
- Roles and responsibilities of workers
- Service provision
- Timeliness of interventions
- Information sharing and communication

If you have a difference of opinion with another professional remember –

- Professional discussion, debate and differences of opinion can aid the assessment process and help to improve outcomes for children, adults and families. Expect to challenge and be challenged. Remain curious and open to different interpretations, hypotheses and opinions.
- No professional's opinion is more important or carries more weight than another's.
- Serious differences and disagreements that impact on delivering a Child Protection or Child's Plan should be resolved as simply and quickly as possible, in the first instance by individual practitioners and/or their line managers. Find the CPC's Escalation Procedure [here](#)
- All professionals should respect the views of others, regardless of their experience, qualification, agency or profession.
- Acknowledge that you might not always be right.
- Working together effectively depends on an open approach and honest relationships between professionals and agencies