

Lockdown Learning: Looking Beyond the Obvious, Asking the Second Question

During the pandemic there have been a number of serious incidents involving young children in Solihull. These cases are complex, and each has generated separate learning in its own right, but a particular theme has been the number of missed opportunities where professionals could have explored more fully the information which was being presented by family members; especially important when children were largely hidden from view and interactions with families were not always face to face due to the Coronavirus restrictions in place at the time. This issue is, however, equally important now that restrictions have been lifted. Learning from case reviews, both nationally and locally, is that responding to presenting issues in isolation can lead to missed opportunities to identify less obvious indicators of vulnerability or risk of harm, thus highlighting the need for professionals to ensure that they are exercising **professional curiosity** in their interactions with families.

What do we mean by professional curiosity?

The task and challenge is to develop authentic relationships with children and families in order to effect positive change, and to do that it is necessary to be curious and ask *'the second question'*. Being curious is a combination of looking, listening, asking direct questions in different ways more than once, checking out and reflecting on information received. It means not taking a single source of information and accepting it at face value. It means testing out your professional assumptions about different types of families. 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 and supports your assessments. In essence, it means looking past the obvious.

What does professional curiosity look like in my work with families?



What supports professional curiosity?

- Being willing to question your own assumptions about how families function and guard against **over optimism**
- Recognising how **your own feelings** (e.g. previous experiences, fatigue or stress) might impact on your view of a child or family on a given day
- Being willing to have **uncomfortable conversations** with families when this is necessary
- Addressing any **anxiety** about how hostile or resistant families might react to being asked direct questions
- Remaining **open minded**
- Being comfortable with **respectful scepticism and challenge**
- Recognising patterns of missed appointments, cancelled home visits, and offers of support not taken up, often referred to as **'disguised compliance' or 'resistance'**
- Understanding the impact of **coercive control** on the behaviours and responses of individuals
- Considering the cumulative impact of **multiple or combined risk factors**
- Demonstrating **critical thinking** and using analytical skills to reframe and reassess your work
- Receiving support and challenge in **good quality reflective supervision**
- Effectively using **dispute resolution/ escalation processes** when needed

What should I do next?

If you are a strategic lead:

- Consider those operational pathways within your service area or organisation where opportunities for exercising professional curiosity might be missed
- Consider whether there is a need to develop practice guidance or service standards for staff and, if so, develop a strategy for embedding them across your operational processes and for quality assuring the impact on frontline practice

If you manage staff:

- Offer regular, good quality reflective supervision which provides both support and challenge to staff in addressing any assumptions or anxieties which may inhibit professional curiosity in their practice
- Identify opportunities within teams or staff groups for holding 'safe' discussions about challenges which arise from having direct or uncomfortable conversations with families to test out what they are saying
- Foster a reflective learning environment that enables honest discussions and creative ways to manage intense demands and the professional and/or personal stress associated with safeguarding children
- Circulate this learning briefing and ask staff to come prepared to talk in supervision about how it relates to their own practice

If you are a frontline practitioner:

- Consider those opportunities within your own day to day practice where you could ask more questions or do more active checking out in your interactions with families
- Identify personal anxieties you have or assumptions you make which might impact on your ability or willingness to be more professionally curious and be prepared to bring these into reflective supervision
- Identify those families where there may be a coercive control dynamic at play which prevents individual family members from being able to tell professionals what is actually happening, and think about how you can create opportunities for them to talk rather than accept what they tell you at face value
- Recognise that the dynamics within families can change, sometimes very quickly, and be prepared to reassess risk and revise plans to reflect changes in circumstances