

Challenging conversations- a guide for professionals



Sandwell Children's
Safeguarding
Partnership

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WHAT IS PROFESSIONAL CURIOSITY?

Professional Curiosity is the capacity and skills of communication 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 meaning that often the first steps to getting the right support, in the right place, at the right time for children and young people often 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.

WHY DO WE NEED TO BE MORE CURIOUS IN SAFEGUARDING?



Understanding the full picture

Ensure that nothing is missed

Improve outcomes for children and young people

Improve practice

Identify disguised compliance

Effective information sharing

Improved assessments

Earlier identification of concerns

Impactful interventions

CHALLENGES TO PROFESSIONAL CURIOSITY

Disguised compliance- A family member or carer gives the appearance of co-operating, to allay professional concerns and ultimately to reduce professional involvement

Professional optimism- Believing that what we are seeing is progress, filtering out or minimizing areas of concern, focusing only on strengths and ignoring what is not working and the risks that arise from that, overly positive interpretations of what is going on.

Normalisation- Working in the safeguarding arena can lead to professionals normalising children's lived experiences due to the high number of families in similar situations leading to them not recognising risk when it is present.

Silo practice- Not seeing the whole picture and responding to individual concerns in isolation rather than assessing concerns in the context of the whole family and the overall lived experiences of the child and considering the cumulative impact.

Professional deference- Deferring to the opinion of a 'higher status' professional. This can lead to the voice of the child not being considered as those having the most interaction with them and therefore holding the most valuable child centred information as bypassed.

Confirmation bias- Looking for evidence that supports or confirms our pre-held views, often coupled with professional optimism leading to contradicting information being refuted or ignored

'Knowing but not knowing'- Sensing that something is not right but not knowing exactly what - making it difficult to grasp the problem and take action

Confidence in managing tension- Disagreement, disruption and aggression can divert away from the topic under discussion and if this is not managed well can lead increased negative outcomes for children and young people

Dealing with uncertainty-Contested accounts, vague or retracted disclosures, deception and inconclusive evidence leads to temptation to discount that which cannot be proved

DISGUISED COMPLIANCE

Professional curiosity or respectful uncertainty is needed when working with families who are displaying disguised compliance. Disguised compliance involves parents or carers giving the appearance of co-operating with agencies to avoid raising suspicions and allay concerns.

Why do some families display disguised compliance?

- Previous negative of involvement with agencies
- Experience of service involvement throughout their own childhood
- Not understanding the concerns of professionals
- Cultural differences
- Fear (that their children may be removed/of authority figures)
- Adverse childhood experiences of parents/carers
- Chaotic lifestyle
- Overwhelmed by professional involvement and demands being made on them
- Something to hide
- Not being able to see their own needs and behaviours and how they impact on the care of the child/ren
- Unidentified or unmet needs
- Parents/carers with additional needs that may not understand what is being asked of them
- Parents/carers with additional needs that may not physically be able to complete tasks they have been set
- Previous history of not receiving help when requested or support ending prematurely
- Unable to see benefits of support that is being offered or the difference it could make

What might you see?

- Parents/carers minimise concerns and their impact on the child/ren
- Parents give the appearance of co-operating with professionals to avoid raising suspicions
- Parents/carers agree with professionals but put little effort to bring about change
- Parents/carers agree to service involvement then avoid home visits or do not attend pre-booked appointments
- Change does occur but only due to agency intervention
- Parents/carers engage with some professionals but not all

MORE ABOUT DISGUISED COMPLIANCE

- Parents/carers play professionals off against each other taking the spotlight off them
- Partial engagement with certain parts of the plan
- Minimal changes are made to give a show of cooperation and engagement
- Children report different information to parents/carers
- Coaching children to suggest all is well
- Families often moving area
- Using clothing and substances such as dirt or food to hide injuries
- Stage managing home conditions and only allowing professionals in to certain parts of the home
- Hiding children, abusers, substances
- Using injury/physical health/mental health as a way to get professionals to feel sorry for them and make additional allowances for lack of change

How can professionals deal with disguised compliance more effectively?

- Focus on the net care that the child is receiving
- Focus on the support needs that have been identified
- Gain the voice of the child and ensure this is kept at the centre of plans and interventions
- Avoid overly focussing on the needs of the adults
- Good information sharing with all professionals involved with supporting the family
- Pay attention to the unsaid- body language, eye contact, behaviours that do not match what is being reported
- Focus on change within the family dynamic and the impact this has on the child's day to day life
- Use SMART focused planning
- Build a relationship with the family that is open and honest
- Use evidence to challenge what is being said rather than just assumption
- Be consistent
- Be persistent

This You Tube clip gives a brief overview of disguised compliance and how professionals can recognise and work with this https://youtu.be/1juU2B6cD_Q

SAFEGUARDING IS EVERYONE'S (MY) RESPONSIBILITY

Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility and where practitioners are concerned each and every professional has a role to play in safeguarding children and young people.

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 young people can actually be very difficult to ascertain
- Professionals do not always listen to adults who try to speak on behalf of a child, such as an advocate or trusted adult, and who may have important information to contribute
- Parents or carers can easily prevent professionals from seeing and listening to a child or young person
- Professionals can be fooled with stories we want to believe are true
- Professionals can be overly optimistic that the plans they made are progressing well
- Effective multi-agency work needs to be well coordinated
- Challenging parents or carers (and colleagues) requires knowledge, confidence, time and a considerable amount of emotional energy

CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS WITH PARENTS/CARERS

Open discussion with parents and carers when there are welfare concerns about a child often provokes anxiety for professionals. However, Professional challenge is part of good safeguarding and child protection practice.

We hope this guidance document will help to increase confidence when undertake challenging conversations with parents/carers.

Please note that the information in this guide is not exhaustive and it should be used as a reference tool alongside professional's own safeguarding policies, procedures, and practices and in conjunction with appropriate support and supervision.

The next 2 pages are dedicated to our top ten tips for successfully having challenging conversations.

Here are some things to avoid:

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

TIPS FOR HAVING CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS

01

Have the conversation as soon as possible

Putting off difficult conversations can leave children in risky situations and raise your anxiety around the conversation itself.

02

Decide on the goals of the conversation

Feel more prepared to start the conversation by considering what it is you want to achieve and what strategies you can use to get there.

03

Choose a good location

An open reception is not confidential enough, however a head teachers office could bring back anxieties from peoples own school experiences

04

Listen with an open mind

Parents/carers may be able to offer some explanations around the concerns you are raising, or may ask for support in their own way

05

Offer empathy

The conversation may become emotional so it is important the you empathise and reassure that you want to reach a resolution together

TIPS FOR HAVING CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS

06

Speak in first person language

By speaking in first person language you can outline your concerns without sounding accusatory

07

Ask questions and practice active listening

This will help you get a better understanding of the parents/carers perspective and allow you to reach some resolutions together

08

Body language

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

09

Manage your own emotions

Your emotions thought the conversation are valid, however you may need to manage these to stop the conversating from escalating

10

Know when to take a break and follow up

As long as the child is not at immediate risk of harm it is OK to take a break as long as you agree a time to come back together to talk

CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS

POSITIVE EXAMPLES

Below are some examples of how to start or have challenging conversations

Note, this is not an exhaustive list and you may develop a technique that works well for you over time using the general principles of openness and honesty combined with curiosity.

- Avoid using 'I think' as this can indicate it is your opinion and not something that you have seen or heard
- Instead of using jargon, use descriptive words to explain your concerns, for example 'Jane has an injury on her face, can you tell me what happened' or 'Paul has been really tired today and he told me he isn't sleeping well, is there anything going on that might be worrying him' or Raheema has been really quiet and withdrawn over the last week, she is usually very bright and outgoing. |Do you have any thoughts on what might have caused this change?'
- Let the person know what is going to happen next and point to your organisation's policies and procedures to support you to explain your decision. An example could be 'When there is a worry about a child or they tell us something concerning like they have been hurt in some way, we have a legal duty to pass this on to children's social care- you may have read about this in the school policies when Kieron started with us last year' or 'Sara told me she was slapped yesterday at home, this is really worrying and we have had to speak to children's social care. They have asked me to speak with you and ask what happened, can you tell me about it?'

Some examples of how to start challenging conversations are:

- Is there a reason why...
- Can we talk about...
- Omar has said...
- I have noticed that...
- Yesterday a member of staff saw...
- Keeley has an injury on her...
- Can you tell me about...
- Do you know how...
- Has anything changed...

CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS WITH PROFESSIONALS

Differences of opinion, concerns and issues can arise for professionals at work and it is important they are resolved as effectively and swiftly as possible.

Having different professional perspectives within safeguarding 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, 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 please remember;

- Professional differences and disagreements can help us find better ways improve outcomes for children, adults and families
- All professionals are responsible for their own cases and their actions in relation to case work
- Differences and disagreements should be resolved as simply and quickly as possible, in the first instance by individual practitioners and/or their line managers
- all professionals should respect the views of others whatever the level of experience – remember that challenging more senior or experienced practitioners can be hard
- expect to be challenged; working together effectively depends on an open approach and honest relationships between agencies

Sandwell's resolution and escalation policy can be found [here](#)

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