

## Multi-Agency Practice Guidance - Professional Curiosity

This guidance is for all professionals working with children, young people, parents, carers, adults with care and support needs, and colleagues.

### What is Professional Curiosity?

Professional curiosity, also known as "respectful nosiness" or "helpful skepticism," is essential in our work. It involves exploring and understanding situations by asking questions and keeping an open mind. It's about recognizing one's responsibility in managing risk and safety and knowing when to act, rather than making assumptions or taking things at face value.

When a practitioner explores and proactively tries to understand what is happening within a family or for an individual, rather than making assumptions or taking a single source of information and accepting it at face value, this supports the to ***'Think the unthinkable, believe the unbelievable.'***

### Applying Professional Curiosity

Professional curiosity can be applied in all relationships, communities, and support networks. It also extends to our relationships with other professionals and ourselves. By appreciating multiple perspectives, we gain a deeper understanding of each other, which enhances our ability to collaborate effectively.

### Key Practices

- **Ask Questions:** Spend time talking and listening to the people you are working with. Ask the 'second question' to understand why something is happening.
- **Consider Multiple Perspectives:** Look beyond the surface to explore the lives of the people you are working with in more depth. Be aware of unconscious bias based on your own culture and background.
- **Challenge Assumptions:** Be able to appropriately challenge thinking and decision-making, whether it is your own or that of others.
- **Respectful Uncertainty:** Apply a critical eye to the information given rather than just accepting things on face value.

### Barriers to Professional Curiosity

- **Rule of Optimism:** Rationalising away new or escalating risks despite clear evidence to the contrary.
- **Accumulating Risk:** Responding to each situation or new risk on its own rather than assessing it within the context of the whole person.
- **Normalisation:** Ideas and actions becoming taken-for-granted or 'natural' in everyday life, stopping them from being questioned.

- **Professional Deference:** Deferring to the opinion of a 'higher status' professional who has limited contact with the person.
- **Confirmation Bias:** Looking for evidence that supports pre-held views and ignoring information that doesn't.
- **Whats the Point:** Being professionally curious can mean taking the time to speak to other's involved with the children and family; this takes time and can add to practitioner stress.

“ I think as a sector, we've got to a point now, what's the point of ringing Social Services? What's the point of trying to call the GP? What's the point even of speaking to the school? ... All of those organisations are so stretched and so under pressure that actually, it can add to my stress. ”

*Professional, Govan* - White et al, December 2024

### Developing Skills in Professional Curiosity

- **Think the Unthinkable:** Maintain an open mind and be willing to think the unthinkable.
- **Look, Ask, Listen, Clarify and Consider:** Observe behaviours, ask questions, listen to verbal and non-verbal cues, and seek clarification.

### Supporting Professionally Curious Practice

- **Supervision and Professional Discussions:** Use these opportunities to question and explore an understanding of the lives of people.
- **Group Supervision:** Stimulate debate and curious questioning, allowing practitioners to learn from one another's experiences.

Professional curiosity is about being open-minded, asking questions, and considering multiple perspectives to understand and support the people we work with better.

### Professional curiosity & culturally competent safeguarding practice

All professionals need to be professionally curious about a child, young person or adult with care and support need's faith, culture, and nationality, and take personal responsibility for informing their work with sufficient knowledge or seeking advice to support this.

“ Prevention is seeing before things happen, it's feeling, it's about learning, learning... building relationships with families with young people and **learning about how they are, how they act, how they are on a daily basis.** ”

*Professional, Grimsby* - White et al, December 2024

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

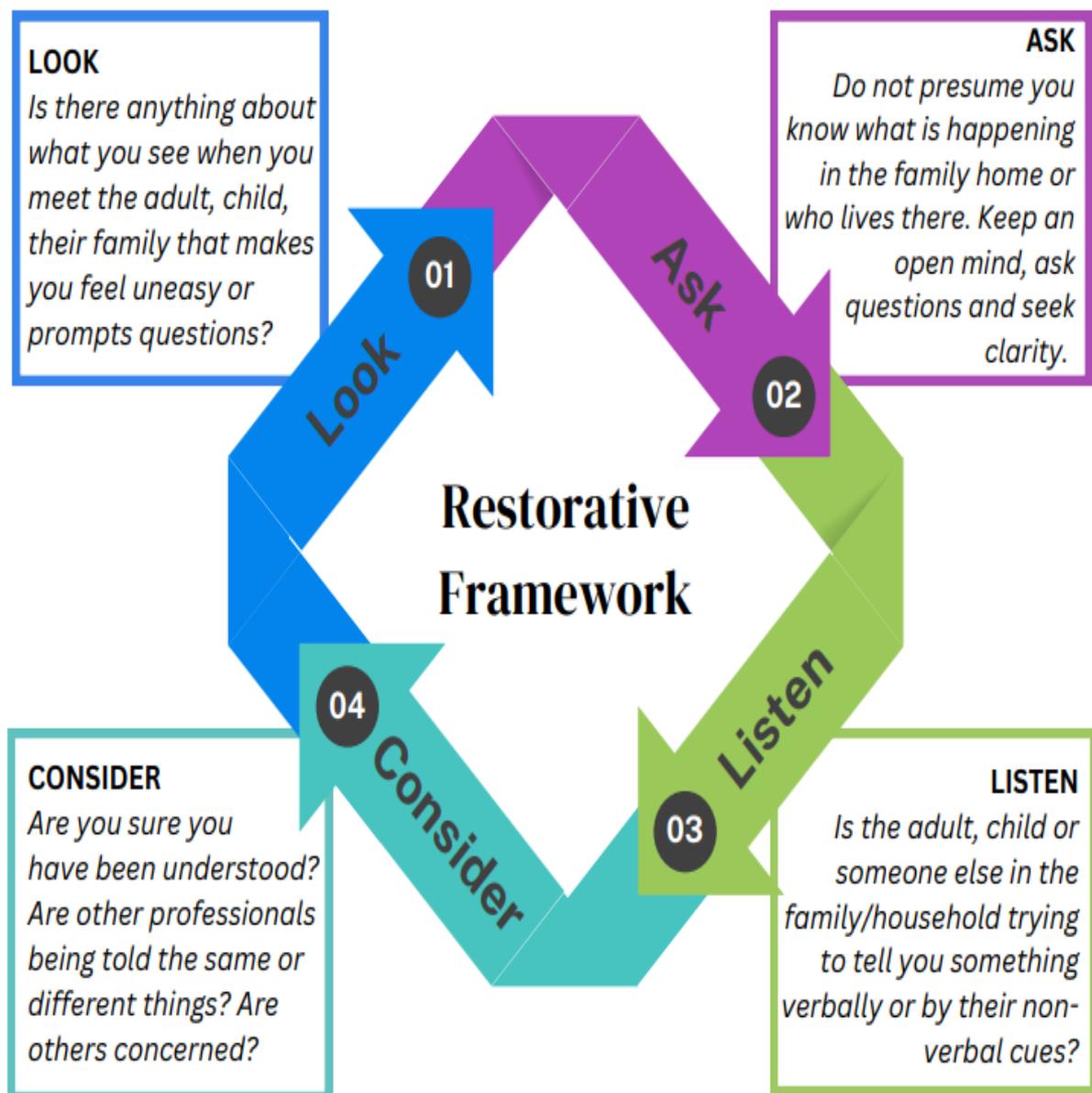
rehabilitation services for the child, young people and their families will support practice.

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.

### Professional Curiosity in Practice

Professional curiosity is where a practitioner explores and **proactively tries to understand what is happening** within a family or for an individual, rather than making assumptions or taking a single source of information and accepting it at face value. This supports practitioners to **'think the unthinkable, believe the unbelievable'** using a **non-judgemental and restorative approach**.



**01**

## Look

- Is there anything about what you see when you meet the adult, child, their family that makes you feel uneasy or prompts questions?
- Do you see behaviours which indicate abuse or neglect, including coercion and control?
- Does what you see contradict or support what you are being told?
- How do family members/other people in the household interact with each other? How do they interact with you?
- Check your records – what do we already know about the family? Are there any relevant previous attendances or contacts?

## Ask

**02**

- Curious professionals will spend time engaging with families during attendances or contacts. 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 or who lives there – keep an open mind, ask questions and seek clarity if uncertain.
- Do not be afraid to ask questions of families, or the persons network, and do so in an open way so they know that you are asking to keep their child or adult safe, not to judge or criticise - see curious conversations resource
- Be open to the unexpected, incorporate information that does not support your initial assumptions into your assessment of what life is like in / for the family.

### Professional Curiosity

**04**

## Consider

- Are you sure that you have been understood? Have you checked that the parent/child understands you? Consider summarising back to them. Do you need any additional support? e.g. Interpreter or Advocacy.
- Are there other professionals involved? What information do they have? Is it useful to arrange a multi-disciplinary discussion?
- Are other professionals being told the same or different things? Are others concerned? If so, what action has been taken so far? Is there anything else which could or should be done by you or someone else to support the adult or child?
- It is important to recognise any potential barriers and work with the family to overcome these – recognise how your own feelings (for example tiredness, feeling rushed or illness) may impact on your view of a child/family during your contact with them.
- Would contacting the Safeguarding Team for safeguarding supervision support your consideration for the needs of this child/family?

## Listen

**03**

- Are you being told anything that needs further clarification?
- Is the adult, child or someone else in the family/household trying to tell you something verbally or by their non-verbal cues?
- Are you concerned about how family members interact and what they say?
- Making time and finding a safe space to have a private conversation, with an adult or child at risk or who is subject to coercion and control, can support open conversations.
- Children in particular 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. We know that it is better to help as early as possible before issues get worse, meaning all agencies and practitioners need to work together – the first step is to be professionally curious.

## Principles that underpin safeguarding children

To support safeguarding discussions with parents / carers:

- Where possible, take time to prepare before you speak to parents.
- Focus the conversation on the needs of the child rather than the behaviours/needs of the adult.
- Be open and honest, communicate in a way that can be understood by the parent/carer.
- Avoid jargon.
- Consider use of parent information sheets and booklets to support your explanation of your statutory duty to safeguard children's welfare, 'duty of care' and requirement to report your concerns.
- Are you adhering to safeguarding guidance and policies? If you are unsure, do you need to check with your Safeguarding Team?

## Planning

- In completing an assessment to understand the needs of the child and family, it is good practice to discuss issues with parents and carers.
- Plan how you are going to start your conversation and how to manage your responses to any challenges or differences of opinions.
- Ensure that considerations are in place to maintain the safety of all people involved – child, parents/carer, staff.
- Arrange an appropriate time and place, respecting the persons privacy and dignity.
- Consider the timing of the meeting depending on the urgency of the concern.
- Consider the communication and support needs for the family members.
- Ensure that you seek supervision to address any tension or anxiety before holding the conversation and gain support for any gaps in your knowledge or skills.
- Know who you can call on for additional support – consider another trusted professional for the child/family.

## Professional Curiosity

## Next steps

Consider the following:

- Communicate effectively.
- Trust your instincts.
- Clarify, do not presume.
- Talk to others who know the family and share your thoughts.
- Ensure your approach is restorative and non-judgemental.
- Seek support if needed.
- Follow safeguarding procedures.
- Complete documentation.
- Discuss during supervision.
- Escalation.
- Referral.

## Conversation

- Frame the concern in a model of help and support.
- Be aware of the language that you choose to use and the influence this may have on the responses e.g. trying words such as 'concerns', 'welfare' and 'duty of care' rather than 'child protection' or 'child abuse.'
- Consider the power balance that you hold in the conversation to avoid unnecessary conflict or defensive responses – explain, don't argue.
- Be straight forward and give clear explanations, using factual information.
- Use active listening – allow time for the person to share their information before giving a response.
- Ensure the experience and voice of the person affected (child or adult) is the priority of the discussion.
- When clarifying details shared, use open questions – 'tell me...' 'explain to me...' 'describe to me...' – and summarise what has been said.
- Avoid excessive reassurance – it may not be all right.
- Almost always with curious conversations, there is a 'now what?' that needs to be answered. Be clear on the reasons for any particular outcome and allow them to reflect on the positive aspects for all parties involved.

**Professional Curiosity: Tips**  
**Including professional curiosity from afar**

When contacting a child or family member on the phone or by video call, the usual clues that help you detect any issues won't be available to you, meaning that we need to think of more creative ways to identify how we implement professional curiosity. It should be recognised that children or parents / carers that cannot talk openly means there may be coercion or controlling behaviour between the family members.

**Telephone calls**

***Is now a good time to talk?***

- Asking the child or family member if this is a good time to talk should give you an indication of whether there is the potential for guarded answers to your questions, for example if someone else is in the room with them at the time of the call.
- By establishing this at the very beginning, you can reduce the pressure on them.

***Are you in a safe space?***

- Asking them if they can talk in another room or outside might help them to talk more openly. It may be that you need to speak another time.

***Consider a code word ahead of time if needed***

- Consider a code word between you and the person you are talking to so you can quickly establish at further meetings whether that person can talk safely and openly.

**Video calls**

**Look:**

- Look at the person, the environment they're in and who else may be present.
- What is their body language telling you?

**Ask:**

- Does what you are seeing support or contradict what you are being told?

**Listen:**

- Is there anything about what you are being told which prompts questions, makes you feel uneasy, or causes you to question the information you have been given?

**Consider:**

- Are you observing behaviour which may suggest signs of abuse or neglect?
- Are there alternative hypotheses that may help to contribute to your treatment/support plan?



**Instead of...**

Asking closed or direct questions which may feel threatening...

Seeing an incident in isolation...

Accepting harmful parenting due to a belief that it is culturally acceptable...

**Try...**

Using open ended questions that start with how, tell, explain or describe. Use positive language and explain why you're asking these questions.

Looking at the whole family and the full picture. Consider all family members, notice any patterns of behaviour. Think about the effect on the child or adult.

Seek clarity around what is happening and how this impacts the child/young person. Challenge if this is in their best interest.

**Useful video links**

[Professional Curiosity Animation](#)

[Bitesize Guide: Professional Curiosity on Vimeo](#) – Waltham Forest Council