

Professional Curiosity

Professional curiosity is a term regularly used but rarely defined. It is an essential attribute in the context of safeguarding children, especially for anyone working with children including social workers, teachers and staff in schools.

Professional curiosity is a vital component of safeguarding children from abuse and neglect.

It empowers teachers and school staff to be vigilant, proactive and responsive to the needs and safety of students. By fostering a culture of professional curiosity, schools can ensure a safer, more supportive environment that promotes the well-being and development of every child.

What is Professional Curiosity?

Professional curiosity refers to the proactive and inquisitive approach adopted by professionals, particularly in contexts involving the well-being and safeguarding of children and young people.

It involves teachers and school staff being vigilant, inquisitive, and not taking situations at face value, especially when there are concerns about a child's welfare.

Importance of Professional Curiosity in Safeguarding Children

Early Identification of Issues

Professional curiosity aids in the early detection of signs of abuse, neglect, or any other harm. Teachers and school staff who are professionally curious are more likely to notice subtle changes in behaviour, physical appearance, or academic performance that may indicate underlying issues.

Prevention of Escalation

By identifying potential safeguarding concerns early, professional curiosity helps in intervening before issues escalate. This proactive approach can prevent further harm to the child and facilitate timely support and early intervention.

Creating a Safe Environment

A culture of professional curiosity contributes to creating a safe and nurturing environment for children. It reassures students that they are in a supportive space where their well-being is a priority, thus promoting their overall development and learning.

Compliance with Safeguarding Policies

In the UK, safeguarding children is a legal requirement for schools, as outlined in the "Keeping Children Safe in Education" guidance. Professional curiosity ensures that teachers and staff are not just passively compliant but actively engaged in safeguarding practices.

Good Record Keeping

This is an essential element of professional curiosity. If records are timely, accurate and in the right place, it creates a simple and clear picture to support the student and the DSL team.

What does this mean for Teaching and Other Staff?

Asking Questions

Don't hesitate to ask further questions when there are doubts or inconsistencies in the information provided about a child's situation. Talk to colleagues and the DSL Team.

Observing Changes

Being attentive to changes in a child's behaviour, emotional well-being, physical appearance, or academic performance.

Collaboration

Working collaboratively with colleagues, parents, and external agencies to gather a comprehensive understanding of a child's circumstances and needs.

Supporting Open and Good Relationships with DSL

Talking with DSLs and keeping records on CPOMS/MyConcern or other systems.

Keeping an Open Mind

It is crucial to maintain an open mind. This includes being willing to think the unthinkable. People who abuse children do not fit any particular profile. They are not always aggressive and obstructive, may be charismatic, well-educated and sociable. It is natural to want to believe the best of a family. Thinking the unthinkable does not mean assuming the worst. It means being able to think objectively about the evidence presented.

Barriers to Curiosity

1. Losing focus on the child through over-identifying with parents/carers.
2. Over-optimism.
3. Making assumptions.
4. Being afraid to raise concerns / question families.
5. Time constraints (e.g. due to workload).
6. Lacking the confidence or assertiveness to ask sensitive questions.
7. Unconscious bias.

How to be Curious

1. Explain at the first meeting/visit that you may have to ask personal or sensitive questions.
2. Never disregard information because it does not fit with your understanding. Be open to the unexpected and willing to change your opinion.
3. Do not make presumptions about what is happening in a family home.
4. Ask questions in an open and relaxed manner. Explain that the intention is not to interrogate but to understand.
5. Beware of inconsistent explanations, vague or retracted disclosures.
6. Do not discount concerns just because they are unproven. Concerns may be both valid and impossible to substantiate.
7. Explanations from the family need to be collated with observation and other sources of information. Is the overall picture consistent?
8. Home visits should include seeing the whole home, especially where the child sleeps.
9. Think family. Who else has an important role in the child's life? Are they also vulnerable?
10. Seek consent to speak to the professional network. Serious case reviews repeatedly find that had all of the information held by different agencies been collated, it would have led to a much clearer picture of the risk to the child.
11. Be aware of how your own background, culture and beliefs impact on the way you interpret a situation.
12. Seek a second opinion. Talk any doubts through with an appropriate colleague.

Discussion Points

1. Still probably the most well known case which involved a school: Daniel Pelka. How far have we moved on? How does the school ensure this or could never happen in our school?
2. What are the warning signs that might raise a safeguarding concern?
3. Do the ideas behind professional curiosity also link to low level concerns? Discuss an example. What would alert you to wonder if the behaviour is a low level concern? What would you do about it?
4. How can a school, continue to build good and open professional relationships that support professional curiosity and safeguarding our students?
5. What else can the DSL team do to help staff be professionally curious?