

# 7 Minute Briefing: “Professional Curiosity”

## How can Managers Support Professionally Curious Practice

- Playing ‘devil’s advocate’, asking ‘what if?’ questions to challenge and support practitioners.
- Present alternative hypotheses about what could be happening.
- Provide opportunity for group supervision to stimulate debate and curious questioning.
- Present cases from the perspective of other family members or professionals.
- Ask practitioners what led them to arrive at their conclusion and support them to think through their evidence.
- Monitor workloads and encourage practitioners to talk and support them to issues of stress and pressure. Support them to recognise the need for a fresh pair of eyes on a case.

## What is Professional Curiosity?

**Professional Curiosity** is the capacity and communication skill to explore and understand what is happening with an individual or family. It is about enquiring deeper and using proactive questioning and challenge. It is about understanding one’s own responsibility and knowing when to act, rather than making assumptions or taking things at face value.

## Barriers to Professional Curiosity

It is important that when a lack of professional curiosity is cited as a factor in a tragic incident, this does not mean that blame should be apportioned. It is widely recognised that there are many barriers to being professionally curious. Some of the barriers to professionally curious practice are set out below:

**Disguised Compliance** – a family member or carer gives the appearance of co-operating with Social Services to avoid raising suspicions, to allay professionals concerns and ultimately to reduce involvement.

**The ‘Rule of Optimism’** – is a well-known dynamic in which professionals can tend to rationalise away new or escalating risks despite clear evidence to the contrary

### **Accumulating risk**

**‘seeing the whole picture’** – professionals respond to each situation or new risk discretely rather than assessing the new information.

**Normalisation** – is social processes through which ideas/actions are seen as ‘normal’ and are ‘taken-for-granted’ and cease to be questioned.

**Professional Deference** – workers who have most contact are in a good position to recognise when the risks are escalating. However there is a tendency to defer to the opinion of a ‘higher status’ professional who has limited contact

**Confirmation Bias** – is When we look for evidence that support or confirms our pre-held view and ignores contrary information that refutes them.

**Knowing but Not Knowing** – is about having a sense that something is not right but not knowing exactly what, therefore difficult to grasp and take action.

**Confidence in Managing Tension** – disagreement, Disruption and aggression from families or others can undermine confidence and divert meetings away from topics the practitioner would like to explore.

**Dealing with Uncertainty** – contested accounts, vague or retracted disclosures, deception and inconclusive medical evidence are common in safeguarding practice. Practitioners are often presented with concerns which are impossible to substantiate. In these situations, ‘there is a temptation to discount concerns that cannot be proved’.

## Developing Skills

- Be flexible, open-minded and not taking everything at face-value.
- Think the unthinkable; believe the unbelievable.
- Use your communication skills: review records, record accurately, check facts and feedback to the people you are working with/for.
- Use case history and explore from the person themselves, their family, friends, neighbours and other professionals.
- Pay as much attention to how people look and behave and speak
- Actively seek full engagement
- Take responsibility for the safeguarding role you play, however large or small

## Other Barriers to Professional Curiosity

Poor supervision, complexity and pressure of work, changes of case worker leading to repeatedly ‘starting again’ in casework, closing cases too quickly, fixed thinking/preconceived ideas and values, and a lack of openness to new knowledge are also barriers to a professionally curious approach.

