

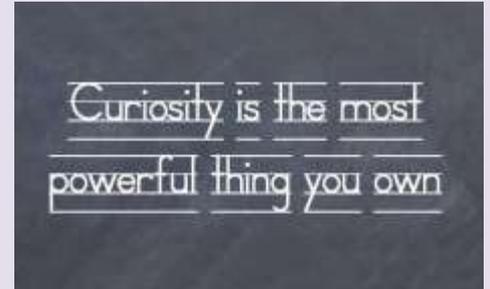
Professional curiosity has been a recurring theme in Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) over the last few years. Redbridge LSCB consider it as an essential part of professionals working together to keep children safe. This guide aims to raise awareness of the need for respectful uncertainty, help you spot the signs of when a parent may be using disguised compliance, and let you know where and how to access support and services.

## What is Professional Curiosity?

Professionals often come into contact with a child, young person or their family when the child is vulnerable to harm. These interactions present opportunities for protection that should not be missed. Professional curiosity is the capacity and communication skill to explore and understand what is happening within a family rather than making assumptions or accepting things at face value.

Children rarely disclose abuse directly to adults working with them and, if they do, it will often be through unusual behaviour or comments. This can make identifying abuse and neglect difficult for professionals across all agencies.

It is better to help children as early as possible, before issues get worse. All agencies and professionals working with children and families need to work together – the first step is to be professionally curious. Curious professionals will spend time engaging with families on visits using their skills to observe and interact. Do not presume you know what is happening in the family home – ask questions and seek clarity if you are not certain. Do not be afraid to ask questions of families, and do so in an open way so they know that you are asking to keep the children safe, not to judge or criticise.



*“Being professionally curious is not simply about asking the question. It is about the language used, creating a trusting relationship, a safe space in which to disclose and giving time to children and young people so they do not feel pressured.”*

[Birmingham Serious Case Review](#)

Be open to the unexpected and incorporate information that does not support your initial assumptions into your assessment of what life is like for the child or children in the family.

### Think Professional Curiosity and Professional Courage:

- The views and feelings of children are actually very difficult to ascertain but achieving this is an essential part of child-centred safeguarding – **often referred to as the ‘voice of the child’**.
- Professionals need to listen to other adults as well as parents, who can speak on behalf of the child and who may have important information to contribute, including siblings.
- Parents and carers can easily prevent professionals from seeing and listening to the child, particularly on their own.
- Professionals can be fooled with stories we want to believe are true, particularly if overly optimistic about what change a family can make.
- Effective multi agency work needs to be co-ordinated and identifying which professional can build a relationship with the family is important – evidence indicates that a partnership style relationship can result in a greater degree of trust and a more open family response.
- Challenging parents (and colleagues) requires expertise, confidence, time and a considerable amount of emotional energy. It is important though to avoid collusion or professional dangerousness.
- Thinking the unthinkable and not relying on self-reporting without challenge or searching for corroborative evidence and triangulating information.
- **Remain diligent in working with families, play ‘devil’s advocate’, present alternative hypotheses and the perspective of the child or another family member.**

# Be Professionally Curious!

Briefings for key safeguarding agencies have been developed, and can be read at [seriouscasereviews.rip.org.uk](http://seriouscasereviews.rip.org.uk)

[Health](#)

[Police](#)

[Social Care & Early Help](#)

[Education](#)

*“Professional curiosity should be exercised far more robustly on a multi-agency basis and shared responsibility for evaluating the presenting issues and evaluating the degree of risk developed rather than practice which is based on “passing on” information to others.”*

**Central Bedfordshire Serious Case Review**

Watch this 2 minute video animation produced by the Nottingham City Safeguarding Children Board, to encourage practitioners to identify children as ‘**was not brought**’ instead of ‘**did not attend**’ when referring to them not being presented at medical appointments.



## Case Examples

Professor [Harry Ferguson](#) highlights the importance of curiosity during home visits and uses the examples of [Peter Connolly](#) and [Daniel Pelka](#). Emphasising the need for professionals to develop relationships with families that lead us to understand their experience, particularly that of the child or young person.

In the [Victoria Climbié Inquiry](#), Lord Laming suggested social workers needed to practice “*respectful uncertainty*”, applying critical evaluation to any information they receive and maintaining an open mind. In safeguarding the term ‘safe uncertainty’, first used by Mason in 1993 is used to describe an approach which is focused on safety for children but that takes into account changing information, different perspectives and acknowledges that certainty may not be achievable.

Child Sexual Exploitation in Oxfordshire – Children A – F

A lack of professional curiosity was identified as a theme in this Serious Case Review (SCR) across a number of different agencies. There were a number of questions that were not answered in relation to young girls accessing contraceptives, frequent missing episodes, reasons behind excessive use of alcohol. An overview report, published in 2015, can be accessed via the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board [website](#).

## Further Reading & Learning

- [Pathways to harm, pathways to protection: a triennial analysis of serious case reviews, 2011 – 2014](#), DfE, 2016
- [Thinking the unthinkable](#), Shahid, N, Professional Social Work, BASW, November 2013
- [Serious Case Reviews – Learning for individual agencies](#), Research in Practice, 2016
- [Child Neglect – Be professionally curious! Investigators/Practitioners Guidance Note](#), National Multi-Agency Child Neglect Strategic Work Group, 2015
- [Disguised compliance and the importance of professional curiosity](#), Sue Woolmore (film), Safeguarding Children eAcademy, Virtual College
- [Supervision and the Dynamics of Collusion: A Rule of Optimism](#), Revell, L & Burton, V, The British Journal of Social Work, Volume 46, Issue 6, 2016
- [Redbridge Local Safeguarding Children Board \(LSCB\) Training Programme](#)

If you have any feedback on this briefing, please contact LSCB Business Manager, via [LSCB@redbridge.gov.uk](mailto:LSCB@redbridge.gov.uk).

## Useful contacts

Redbridge LSCB: 020 8708 3289  
Designated Nurse Safeguarding Children: 07769 887671  
Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO): 020 8708 5350

If you are concerned about a child call the Child Protection and Assessment Team (CPAT) on 020 8708 3885 (or 020 8708 5897 after 17:00 and at weekends) or e-mail [CPAT.Referrals@redbridge.gov.uk](mailto:CPAT.Referrals@redbridge.gov.uk). In an emergency, call the Police on 999.