

 PRACTICE TIP – PROFESSIONAL CURIOSITY.

Serious Case reviews repeatedly identify Social Work failings in the context of having a lack of professional curiosity.

This practice tip unpicks how Professional Curiosity can be applied in day to day practice.

Professional curiosity is described as having the capacity and skill in communication, and the ability to explore and understand what is happening within a family rather than making assumptions or accepting things at face value.

Professor Harry Ferguson has written about the importance of curiosity during home visits and uses the examples of the Baby Peter and Daniel Pelka cases. He highlights the need for authentic, close relationships with children of the kind where we see, hear and touch the truth of their experience and are able to act on it, and to achieve similar closeness with parents / carers.

Touching the truth is the difficulty. Children and their parents/carers often say things to deflect, avoid, lie, or appease. Their responses need to be tested over time alongside a triangulation of other sources of information.

Information cannot be taken at face value. It must be placed in context. This requires curiosity not only about the event and circumstances around it, but also about the history of the child, the parent/carer and any partner. Chronologies should be used with families to build a picture of life events they report as having experienced. Sharing these chronologies across agencies helps to validate the information provided, plus fill in any missed gaps of information which was not shared or forgotten.

Information taken in isolation, to the exclusion of that information owned by other family members and/ or agencies will lead to false assessments.

 Some families may not provide consent to contact other agencies and or family members, there may be a genuine reason for this, and this will need to be explored to test the rationale and reasonableness of this position.

SCR’s repeatedly highlight that one of the missed opportunities for safeguarding children came as a result of poor multi agency working. Practitioners should never automatically accept the parents position of no contact, curiosity and respectful probing needs to unpick why this position is taken, and whether the parent understands the context of safeguarding and what this means for the child. Practitioners need to discuss this in detail with their managers prior to making any decision about next steps.

Professional curiosity requires practitioners to think outside the box, at times this may require a positon of devil’s advocate. Time again practitioners believe, and want to believe the parents account. Disguised compliance by the parent and over optimism by the practitioner are a dangerous combination when working with families. The child gets lost, and the focus of intervention becomes blurred, sadly this resulted in catastrophic consequences for Daniel Pelka.

Assessments and intervention needs to be informed by what is seen, heard, felt and experienced. A practitioner that is able to use their senses on visits is able to more easily enter the child’s world;

* Listen to what is said, as much as what is not said. Hear the words and the tone
* Observe the responses and interactions, and take note of watchfulness, eye contact, and levels of stress.
* Smell the smells of the home and the children, is it fresh and clean? Or old, stale, and unkempt? Are there smells of alcohol or drugs?
* Feel the condition of the home, does it feel relaxed and fun, or tense and angry?

The sensory experience is what connects you to the child’s world, so be curious about it and refer back to it to ensure there is consistency in response, observation and explanation.

We have to accept that children and their families need time to build trusting relationships with professionals. Trust is not based on minimisation or a desire to be perceived as a friend. Trust is built on honesty and respect. Practitioners need to inform families of the worry, and hear their account for this. Families need to hear that as professionals we are trying to understand, because with understanding comes solutions.

Curiosity if done respectfully can facilitate engagement. Expressions of enquiry could be:

* I’m curious as to how…..
* Help me understand ….
* What do you think……
* Tell me a little about….
* Describe what/ how
* I wonder what…

Be mindful of criticism and holding a predisposed belief, this can restrict engagement and distort the assessment, as information is subconsciously sought and filtered in order to fulfil the existing belief. Practice using different hypothesis as this enables different types of information to be gathered.

Why questions can be viewed as an interrogation, therefore use them sparingly. They do not generate curiosity unless used in an enquiring manner ie I wonder why that…..

Professional curiosity is about having a conversation, a conversation based on exploration and not initial acceptance.

Things to remember –

* Expect the unexpected
* Be mindful of over optimism
* Healthy skepticism supports curiosity and challenge
* Reliance on self-reporting can distort the assessment
* Information in isolation draws false conclusions
* Collaborative working generates better outcomes
* Assumptions lead to inaccurate/incomplete assessments
* History is the best indicator for the present and future
* Fixed views restrict information and analysis
* Does the voice add up with the presentation?
* Triangulation of information provides scrutiny
* Think the unthinkable
* Have you lost sight of the child?
* Do you understand what one day in their life is like? And if so what information informs this?

June 2019