

Principal Social Worker's Practice and Learning Bulletin



Welcome to the August edition of the bulletin

Hello everyone

I hope you are finding these bulletins useful; for this month I am doing a practice focus on Professional Curiosity, revisiting this because it was such a feature of the national review into the deaths of Arthur Lanbinjo - Hughes and Star Hobson. I will also be looking at risk and safety planning as this is the practice focus for September and October

Also in this edition

- My blog about mindfulness now I have finished the 8 week course.
- Learning from 2 Stage 2 learning and development opportunities.



As always, please let me know if you want to see something in the bulletin or want to contribute an article.



Best wishes

Traci Taylor

Principal Social Worker/Service Manager



PROFESSIONAL CURIOSITY

What does it mean?

It is the ability to explore and understand what is happening within a family rather than making assumptions or accepting things at face value. It requires you to think 'outside the box', and consider families' circumstances holistically. Curious professionals engage with individuals and families through visits, conversations, observations and asking relevant questions to gather historical and current information

It is a combination of looking, listening, asking direct questions, checking out and reflecting on information received. It means:

- testing out your professional hypothesis and not making assumptions
- triangulating information from different sources to gain a better understanding of individuals and family functioning
- getting an understanding of individuals' and families' past history which in turn, may help you think about what may happen in the future
- obtaining multiple sources of information and not accepting a single set of details you are given at face value
- having an awareness of your own personal bias and how that affects how you see those you are working with
- being respectfully nosy

Why is professional curiosity important in our work?

Professional curiosity is a golden thread through Safeguarding Partnership learning reviews and audits and is an essential part of our roles when making sure that arrangements for children are safe and appropriate. Nurturing professional curiosity is a fundamental aspect of working together to keep children, young people and adults safe.

A lack of professional curiosity can lead to:

- missed opportunities to identify less obvious indicators of vulnerability or significant harm
- assumptions made in assessments of needs and risk which are incorrect and lead to wrong intervention for individuals and families

- the presenting issues are dealt with in isolation
- asking questions and seeking explanation from parents/carers is something to be valued; healthy challenge is good and can provide assurance that your assessment of the situation is accurate.



- reliance on self reporting from parents (accepting things on face value without checking it out) brings with it significant risks of making decisions and judgements based on false information.
- good information sharing, supervision and open discussion at key decision-making meetings to 'check and test' information is crucial in ensuring this does not happen.

What is disguised compliance and how does this fit with professional curiosity?

To fully understand the importance of professional curiosity you also have to understand the meaning of disguised compliance.

Disguised compliance involves parents or carers giving the appearance of co-operating with agencies to avoid raising suspicions and raise concerns. An element of disguised compliance can be seen in a number of families we work with but that can be for all sorts of reasons, saving face, worried about being judged.

There is a continuum of behaviours from parents or carers on a sliding scale, with full co-operation at end of the scale, and planned and effective resistance at the other. At its worst superficial cooperation may be to conceal deliberate abuse; and many case reviews highlight that professionals can sometimes miss the signs of this by the acceptance of self reporting without further exploration.

Remembering the following principles will help you to respond to disguised compliance more effectively.

- Focus on the needs, voice and 'lived experience' of the child or young person.
- Avoid being encouraged to focus extensively on the needs and presentation of the adults or carers – whether aggressive argumentative or apparently compliant—always bring things back to the child or young person.
- Think carefully about the 'engagement' of the adult or carers and the impact of this behaviour on your view of risk—check out the information you are being given through checks with other people/professionals.
- Ask questions designed to probe further, and ask again—be prepared to have a difficult conversation with parents/carers and challenge things you know to be incorrect.
- focus on change in the family dynamic and the impact this will have on the life and well-being of the child or adult – this is a more reliable measure than the agreement of adults or carers in the professionals plan; what is observable?
- there is some evidence that an empathetic approach by professionals may result in an increased level of trust and a more open family response leading to greater disclosure by adults and children.

- practitioners need to build close partnership style relationships with families whilst being constantly aware of the child or adult's needs and the degree to which they are met.
- Refresh your training on disguised compliance regularly.

There is no magic way of spotting disguised compliance other than the discrepancy between an adult or carer's accounts and observations of the needs and accounts of the child or adult. The child must always take precedent and be central to the planning and actions required.

Curious professionals will spend time engaging with families on visits. 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 – 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 child or adult safe, not to judge or criticise. 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 adult in the family.



The Workforce and Learning Service is running a series of learning events focusing on **Professional Curiosity**—this is face to face delivery on the following dates (with more being added)

10th August - Keighley Town Hall - **5 places available**

31st August - **FULL**

28th September - **4 places available**

13th October - **17 places available**

17th November - **13 places available**



Difficult conversations that we may need to have with families who use our services can provoke anxiety and this can prevent them from happening. It is important that we all learn how to have these types of conversations to keep children and young people safe.

Top Tips to having difficult conversations

1. Planning is key

Where is it possible to plan for a difficult conversation gather all the facts, preparing any evidence you may need from your case notes. This is particularly important for conversations that may stimulate emotional or defensive responses; collecting the necessary evidence will allow you to discuss the issue in a clear and neutral manner.

2. Clarify the message

The next step should be to clarify the exact purpose of the conversation and what the desired outcome is. If you are anxious about this it is useful to discuss this in supervision to explore this and look at how you can manage this by considering potential responses and how to respond to this.

3. Consider emotional responses

Take time to think about how the individual may respond emotionally. Present the information as neutrally as possible but be very clear and do not 'go round the houses'. An adult's emotional response can often hinder practitioners to continue with difficult questions or conversations; however, it is important that this does not put you off from having the conversation; acknowledge the distress but continue in a respectful manner.

4. Consider how you respond to conflict

Think about how your own body responds to conflict. Even if you feel you are able to respond to certain types of behaviour with a calm and rational turn of phrase, remember that feelings such as impatience or annoyance may be communicated non-verbally, through body language and tone of voice. Be mindful of your own safety and recognise when pushing on a point may place you at risk.

5. Bite the bullet

If you have identified the need for a difficult conversation, deal with it promptly before the problem escalates. Once fully prepared, find an appropriate time and place to have the conversation.

6. Use a productive opening

The opening of the conversation will help to shape the direction of the entire meeting. An unhelpful opening that implies blame is likely to make the individual stressed and emotional. Instead, try summarising the problem and inviting collaboration, for example: "I read through my records and have highlighted some areas I was worried about, can we discuss this together?"

7. Be clear about what happens next

Once you have agreed a solution, bring the conversation to a close. In doing so, summarise what the solution is, what was agreed and then agree who should do what next.

To help you with the skills to have a difficult conversation the Workforce and Learning Service offers a face to face half day workshop called

'Courageous Conversations for Practitioners'

The next available dates are:

6th October - 19 available places

8th December - 20 available places

Book through Evolve

There's an emotional toll ...



66%

**feel stressed or
anxious if they
know a difficult
conversation is
coming up**



Our practice evolves from learning from what we do well but also when we have had a complaint about our practice and this has been looked at to see whether the complaint was valid. Stage 2 complaints are completed independently and there is usually an action plan for practice development if it is considered that any part of the complaint can be upheld after investigation. This month we have learning from two Stage 2 complaints.

A complaint from a father was upheld on the following points with key areas of learning.

Information was not readily understood by the father despite this being explained a number of times on the phone and in person. **Action:** CSC to consider writing to people where there are communication difficulties especially where serious allegations have come to the attention of the department.

Information recorded in the records should be accurate in respect of health conditions and needs to be more specific in respect of whether an individual should be referred for drug treatment or alcohol treatment. There is a need for improved recording of information – information recorded should not be contradictory. **Action:** It is important to check information so that you are recording factually correct information; health conditions should either be verified by a health professional or recorded as being self reported. Additionally it should be specified whether someone is a drug or alcohol user or both; i.e. specify if they are undergoing drug treatment or alcohol treatment.

That address information is verified with the individual directly. **Action:** Ensure that correct addresses are recorded on children's files including for individuals who are significant to them.

Any addresses should be verified with the individual to ensure that any mail addressed to them arrives and is not sent to the wrong address as this is a breach of GDPR.

A complaint from a Mother was upheld on the following point with a key area of learning.

Ongoing CSC should ensure that there are records on case files of formal meetings held. **Action:** Ensure that that when meetings take place that there is a formal record that this has taken place and that the minutes are recorded or uploaded on the records in a timely manner.

The word "MINDFULNESS" is written in a colorful, multi-colored font where each letter is filled with a different color and has a slight shadow effect. The colors include shades of blue, green, yellow, orange, and red.

BLOG

So, I have now completed my 8 week mindfulness programme; that has gone so quickly! I have gone from being that person who thought *"it's a great idea but I don't have time to do an 8 week programme"* to being really disappointed that I will not be rocking up to City Hall on a Wednesday am to practice mindfulness techniques and feeling quite bereft at the thought.

On the way to the last session, I walked with a colleague and we were reflecting on our experience of this programme; we were able to identify the changes we had made in our lives to practice mindfulness in some form everyday. We were not alone, the whole group spoke about the difference that these sessions have made to us and how we have each incorporated this. This ranged from mindfulness tooth brushing (still me), to meditation at specific points every day, to body mapping to go to sleep. The one thing we all had in common is that we have learnt to be more 'present' in the moment.

So, for those of you who have not read my previous blogs being present in the moment is to literally do just that—experience that moment in time and not be thinking about another moment (memory) or planning something (future).

Being in the moment means being aware of yourself in that moment, what do you hear, smell, feel. For me, this was one of my goals I wanted to achieve. I felt that life was running away with me and I was always thinking about the next thing I needed to do, planning what I was doing later, tomorrow, the weekend....and then before I knew it, It was Monday morning and I was back at work; sound familiar? Now my first real experience of what that meant in our first session was the art of eating a raisin, my worst nightmare! However, this got the point across really well about being present in the moment. I genuinely feel that I have more time as I am more aware of my experiences and I am not always rushing to the next thing.

As per previous blogs about this the neuroscience behind this is fascinating and makes complete sense; especially when you understand the innate, fight, flight, freeze flop concept which our brain is wired to respond to.

The brain is designed to keep us alive so it is highly receptive to what it perceives as danger and therefore is pre-programmed into negativity - we have to work purposefully to counteract that; one of the things I am finding myself using a lot is the ability to recognise my neuropathway focusing on negative thoughts; Mark taught us that by acknowledging those thoughts we can move them to one side and concentrate on positives; if we don't acknowledge them they keep nudging back in all day.

Our brain is also quite critical of us and I learnt that the things I tell myself about me I would never say about another person; this was a very powerful lesson for me.

Mindful movement was a concept that I was aware of prior to joining this 8 week programme as I have joined one of Marks weekly sessions previously but in this programme we have practiced and practiced this, and I can genuinely say that this is a real stress buster, it is

energising and this is something I really want to maintain; I felt quite agitated the other morning at home and I started to do the movements and before I knew it I was jiggling away in the safety of my own kitchen; when I stopped I genuinely did not feel agitated any longer; I felt calm and energised. The concept behind this is that you are getting rid of stress hormones and increasing happy hormones; this is not the same as exercise, it is very deliberate movements and being very mindful of them, how I feel, what I feel.

I have set myself a goal of joining one of Marks lunch time sessions at least every other week, although I would like to attend weekly and I know other people want to commit to this too. So, if you suddenly see random people standing at their desks jiggling furiously around you know that they are in a mindfulness session.

Mark runs mindful movement and stretching sessions every Tuesday 1.00—1.30pm on teams.



Mark runs mindful meditation sessions every Thursday 12.30 pm - 1.00 pm on Teams.

If you want to join any of these sessions then please email mark.anslow@bradford.gov.uk and he will add you to the invite list.

My next step is to practice more meditation; the meditation practice we have done in the sessions seem to be over in seconds but in reality they may have lasted 15—20 minutes, I feel so relaxed during and afterwards and my thoughts have been clearer and more focused. I have read up on the benefits of meditation. It can -

- Reduce stress and anxiety
- Increase resilience
- Produces a deep state of peace and well-being
- Increase life satisfaction
- Increase happiness and optimism
- Create, harmonious and loving relationships
- Helps promote sleep

The other key aspect of mindfulness is the link to kindness; so being mindful about kind acts no matter how small and thinking about acts of kindness you have received. I am still going strong with my gratitude journal; I have realised I don't have to have huge sweeping gestures of kindness I just need to appreciate small, tiny things I have noticed and this as powerful if not more so because it means that I am appreciating life more.

I would really recommend you give the 8 week programme a try; you will find so much benefit from this, speak to colleagues who have already done this or join one of the lunch time sessions. I want to say a huge thank you to Mark for introducing this to us and his passion for the benefits of this and also a huge thank you to the group I was with on this journey.



Here are some of the learning and development opportunities in August available to you.

09.08.22 Assessment, Analysis & Planning

10.08.22 Poverty and Neglect

10.08.22 Professional Curiosity

16.08.22 Chronology training

16.08.22 Trauma Workshop 1- What is Trauma; Introduction to Trauma Informed Awareness.

18.08.22 Assessment, Analysis & Planning

22.08.22 Early Help Assessments & SMART Planning

24.08.22 Team Around the Family & Impact (Early Help Training)

31.08.22 Professional Curiosity

For all new starters, please make sure that you book into an Induction session. Also please make sure that you can access Evolve so you can book on to sessions; and remember that we subscribe to the following so please set up your account to access a range of learning and development opportunities.

Research in Practice: www.researchinpractice.org.uk

Children's Social Work Matters: www.childrensocialworkmatters.org

Feedback is really important to us to make sure that we are getting things right. Please have your say about the training and development being offered via your evaluation forms as we are using this feedback to adapt our workshops.

**WE APPRECIATE
YOUR FEEDBACK
THANK YOU!**