

Reflection and Professional Curiosity Practice Resource

Introduction

‘Thinking about your thinking’

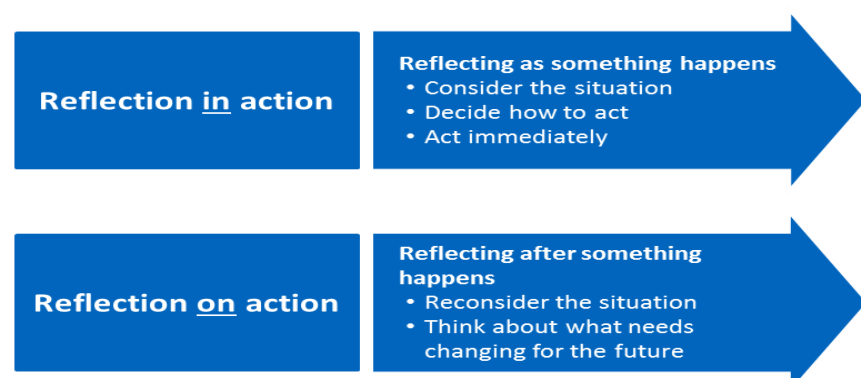
Professional curiosity is a concept which has been recognised as important for many years in the area of safeguarding children and more recently in safeguarding adults with care and support needs. Curiosity is required to support all practitioners working in safeguarding to question and challenge the information they receive, identify concerns and make connections to enable a greater understanding of a person’s situation.

Reflection is part of practice, not an ‘add on’ – thinking and reflecting on your work and experiences should be part of your working day – you have permission and you need to give permission to your staff; being able to reflect is a key skill in being able to be professionally curious.

This Practice Guidance will outline the concepts of both Reflection and Curiosity in Practice, consider the barriers and offer prompts and ideas on how to overcome those barriers to ensure safeguarding practice is robust, evidence informed and well supported.

Reflection:

How professionals think in and on action (Schon, 1983)



Reflection-in-action is reflection during the ‘doing’ stage (that is, reflecting on the incident while it is happening and can still benefit the learning). This is carried out during the interaction, reflecting on what you can change about your approach ‘in the moment’ rather than reflecting on how you would do things differently in the future.

This is an extremely efficient method of reflection as it allows you to react and change an event at the time it happens. For example, you may be talking about a concern that has been raised about someone’s behaviours but you can see the recipient is not understanding. Your reflection-in-action allows you to understand why this has happened and how to respond to overcome this situation.

Reflection-in-action allows you to deal with surprising incidents that may happen in any environment. It allows you to be responsible and resourceful, drawing on your own knowledge and allowing you to apply it to new experiences. It also allows for personalised practice as, rather than using preconceived ideas about what you should do in a particular situation, you decide what works best at that time for that unique experience and person.

Reflection-on-action, involves reflecting on how practice can be developed after the visit/interaction has taken place. This is reflecting back 'in order to discover how our knowing-in-action may have contributed to an unexpected outcome' (Schön, 1983).

Reflection-on-action means you reflect after the event on how your knowledge of previous conversations (for example) may have directed you to the experience you had.

Reflection-on-action should encourage ideas on what you need to change for the future. You carry out reflection-on-action outside the event, where you consider the situation again. This requires deeper thought, for example, as to why the receiver did not understand the concern. It encourages you to consider causes and options, which should be informed by a wider network of understanding from research

Model of Reflection: Gibbs' Reflective Cycle

There are many models of reflection, many based on Kolb's Learning Styles concept, a classical model representing the way we experience learning in our everyday life and work, and how we learn best in a practical sense, moving between active and reflective modes. One such, well established, model is Gibbs Reflective Cycle



Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle is straightforward and covers 6 stages:

- Description of the experience.
- Thoughts and feelings about the experience.
- Evaluation of the positive and negatives of the experience.
- Analysis to make sense of the experience.
- Conclusion about what you learned and what you could have done differently.
- Action plan (reflection) upon experience to look what you would do if a similar situation arose again.

Critical Reflection

Critical reflection means identifying and exploring our thoughts, feelings, 'gut instincts' and experiences and then considering how they fit in with the ideas, practice knowledge, and theories that we are aware of or that others we work with have been discussing and sharing.

When we use critical reflection, we not only explore our own thoughts, events and experiences but also examine them from different perspectives and consider whether this might change our approach or own perspective. In this way we consistently evaluate our actions and approaches to our safeguarding role. Critical reflection is a common practice in many professions to help workers improve, change or re-examine current practice, perspectives, thinking and skills.

Questions to prompt deeper critical reflection

This is not an exhaustive list but just some ideas on questions you can ask yourself to help in your critical reflection:

- How did my own experiences and knowledge influence my understanding and actions of a particular activity or interaction this week?
- How did I take into account the needs, perspectives and opinions of the people I was working with in this situation?
- Did my personal values and possible biases impact on my experiences or practice this week?
- How do my fellow safeguarding practitioners, or manager view this situation or action? (Thinking about things from someone else's perspective is a key part of reflection)
- What do I need to find out more about?
- What other theories might provide me with a different viewpoint on this subject?
- In what way are my choices determined by the expectation of my service or leader?
- What does this action/environment/observation tell me about?
- How could my team members/coordinator/leader/friend help me in this area?
- Were there broader social and/or political, and/or emotional issues that influenced my actions?

- Did my usual assumptions mislead my practice somehow? What assumptions can I challenge next time?
- What knowledge did I use to reflect upon observations this week?
- Why do I think that?
- What did I learn about this?
- How would I do it differently or better next time?
- How might the outcome of that activity/experience been different if I?

(Adapted from the empowered educator online 'critical reflection for educators' June 2018)

Reflection in Practice

Questions to consider:

Self-Reflection – Do you reflect 'in action' and 'on action'? What stops you reflecting? What promotes your reflection?

Reflection with others – Do you have opportunities to reflect with colleagues?

Reflection doesn't need to (and shouldn't) be about always looking for something you or others might have done wrong – think about it as being brave enough to identify your current values and biases and then consider and explore a colleague's view that might differ to your own. Discuss with others about how their view influences their own practice in this area and perhaps how you could try a different way of doing something to see what happens.

Professional Curiosity

'Curiosity is the fuel for discovery, inquiry and learning'.

What is Professional Curiosity?

Professional curiosity is a skill; it is the capacity to be able to explore and understand what is happening in any given situation rather than making assumptions or accepting things at face value.

This has been described as the need for practitioners to practice 'respectful uncertainty' – applying critical evaluation to any information they receive and maintaining an open mind. This doesn't mean we 'don't believe' but that we use a combination of looking, listening, asking direct questions, checking out and reflecting on information received. It means not taking a single source of information and accepting it at face value. It means testing out your professional assumptions about different types of people and situations.

Professional curiosity will require you to think 'outside the box', beyond your usual professional role, and consider peoples' circumstances holistically. It means **we don't** hear or see something and think 'it's not my role to do/consider/think about that'

What stops us being curious?

When a lack of professional curiosity is cited as a factor in a serious incident, it is important to remember this does not automatically 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:

A lack of confidence - disagreement, disruption and aggression from those we are working with, can undermine confidence and divert meetings away from topics the practitioner wants to explore and back to the person's own agenda. Confidence can be built by practicing challenging conversations and using supervision to reflect on what has happened and what you can do differently next time.

Professional deference - practitioners who have most contact with the individual are in a good position to recognise the risks to or from the person. However, there can be a tendency to defer to the opinion of a 'higher status' professional who may have more limited contact with the person but who views the risk differently. Be confident in your own judgement and always outline your observations and concerns to other professionals; be courageous and challenge their opinion of risk if it varies from your own

'Knowing but not knowing' - this is when we have a sense that something is not right but don't know exactly what, so it is difficult to grasp the problem and take action. Relying on 'instinct alone can be prone to bias, but it is important we do not dismiss 'gut instinct'; it comes from somewhere. You need to explore, on your own and with others, where the feeling comes from, and what the evidence base for it is.

Rule of optimism – this is where we do not want to acknowledge that things are not getting better and that we need to make the hard decision. We want people to do well, for risks to reduce, and when we work closely with people, we naturally want to be optimistic. This can make it harder for us to be curious about and act on continuing risks. Use supervision, whether formal or informal, and discussion with peers to invite challenge and reflection on your views

Confirmation bias – this is our tendency to cherry-pick information that confirms our existing beliefs or ideas. Confirmation bias explains why two people with opposing views on a topic can see the same evidence and come away feeling validated by it. Again using reflection and challenge with and from your manager and peers will help you understand any biases you are bringing to a situation.

Safe uncertainty/respectful nosiness

In Safeguarding work it is important to apply critical evaluation to any information received and maintain an open mind. In safeguarding the term 'safe uncertainty' is used to describe an approach which is focused on safety but that takes into account changing information, different perspectives and acknowledges that certainty may not be achievable.

Do not presume to know what is happening in a person's life or home – ask questions and seek clarity if you are not certain. Do not be afraid to ask questions of people, and do so in an open way so they know that you are asking to keep a 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 you are working with.

Critical Thinking

"Maintaining an open minded attitude and being able to think about different ways of understanding the information before you...evaluating claims and arguments in order to come to logical and consistent conclusions...and being able to spell out the reasons for the judgements you have reached." Brown and Turney 2014

Hypothesising

In Safeguarding it is important to be constantly testing and revising hypotheses and assumptions. It is important therefore to create a working environment where professionals are actively encouraged to question judgements and feel safe to reconsider a situation.

Hypothesising in a safeguarding situation is different from scientific hypotheses. It is not seeking a single truth, but it is an aid to the conversation and understanding about what life is like for people you are working with, it is helping to find meaning in their situation and seeing their world.

It is important to:

- Actively seek evidence to disprove or challenge a hypothesis – avoid simply confirming the dominant concern.
- Ask yourself questions about competing goals, factors that favoured courses of action, what might happen if....
- Consider what factors have led to changes in views.
- Be conscious of value placed on sources of hypothesis...would you treat the same information from a different source differently?
- Look for discrepancies.
- Record different possibilities in assessments and case records – we need to consider uncertainty as well as certainty.

Challenge

It is important that safeguarding practitioners can challenge themselves and others and that they can accept challenge on their practice, views and judgements.

Managers and colleagues should challenge our assumptions. Practitioners should expect and welcome questions such as: why do you think that? What is the evidence? Have you thought about? What if it's something else? If someone challenges you, it doesn't always mean they think you are wrong.....they are asking you to be clear about why you think you are right

It is important to not become defensive; challenge is healthy and helpful and enables us to be curious

When we are reflecting on and challenging our own and others views, we should ask the following questions:

- If it isn't....what else might it be?
- How do I/you know? How do I/you find out?
- Am I/are you biased? Have I/you made an assumption?
- Is something else impacting on my/your judgement (e.g. time, caseload pressure, previous experience, personal life)?
- Why do I/we/you think it is...? What evidence do I/we/you have?
- Could (other professional/family member) be right?

IT IS OK FOR US NOT TO HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS – Reflecting and challenging yourself can just be a starting point for asking different questions and being more curious.

Ask questions, don't assume, challenge views and perceived explanations - challenge yourself and others with 'but what if it means this?' and 'have we thought about that?'; test your hypotheses, discuss with your managers and peers.

Supporting reflective and curious practice

Building reflection into practice allows for regular review of assumptions and formulations in the light of new information. It is important that spaces are created in the working environment and time to allow for this. This can be through peer discussion; self-reflection; group reflection; supervision.

Reflective Practice Groups can be effective in promoting curiosity and safe uncertainty, as practitioners can use these spaces to think about their own judgments and observations. It also allows teams to learn from one another's experiences, and the issues considered in one case may have echoes in other workloads.

Practitioners also need the time and space to reflect and discuss the situation with people who can offer a fresh perspective and challenge their assumptions and beliefs. Whilst they may receive this support from peers or external consultants, it is within supervision where this should routinely be cultivated and expected.

Conclusion

- Be flexible and open-minded, do not take everything at face value. Reflect on your own emotional state, attitudes, values and bias.
- Think the unthinkable and believe the unbelievable. Think about how you can articulate 'intuition' or 'gut instinct' into an evidenced based, professional view.
- Review records, make sure you record accurately, check facts and feedback to the people you are working with and for. Never assume and be wary of assumptions already made.
- Use case history and explore information from the person themselves, their family, friends and neighbours (if appropriate), as well as other professionals (triangulation).
- Pay as much attention to how people look and behave as to what they say.

Professional curiosity is likely to flourish when practitioners:

- Attend good quality training to help them develop.
- Have access to good management support and supervision.
- Have empathy ('walk in the shoes') of the person to consider the situation from their lived experience.
- Listen to people who speak on behalf of the person and who have important knowledge about them.
- Be alert to those who prevent professionals from seeing or listening to the person.
- Do not rely on the opinion of only one person, wherever possible.
- Have an analytical and reflective approach.
- Develop the skills and knowledge to hold difficult conversations.