

Spotting child abuse and neglect early requires caregiver curiosity

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More training and emotional support is needed for school staff who are relied upon to keep children safe from abuse and neglect. That's one recommendation from a new report by the University of Portsmouth.

Being interested in the stories of parents and carers—known as 'professional curiosity' – is essential in the early intervention of abuse and in keeping children safe. Its significance has been a recurrent theme in inquiries into child abuse and neglect in the UK over the past decade.

However, until now, there has been a notable lack of research into the lived experience of those [school staff](#) who hold significant responsibilities for keeping children safe. Research published in *Pastoral Care in Education* examined the experiences of practitioners in pastoral and support roles in schools across two local authorities in England.

Dr. Emma Maynard, Senior Lecturer in the School of Education and Sociology at the University of Portsmouth said that they "found that professional curiosity was a highly emotive concept. School support staff—so often the first to ring alarm bells in abuse cases, felt the support they were offered was inconsistent and in some cases a question of 'luck'."

"Professional curiosity comes into its own when indicators of child abuse are less visible. In these circumstances it requires a practitioner to remain 'uncertain' about a worrying situation and display interest and curiosity towards a parent's narrative. In past cases, it has been suggested that if practitioners had acknowledged feelings of uncertainty around the visible and non-visible signs of abuse and neglect, and displayed curiosity in response to this uncertainty, harm to children could have been prevented. The responsibility on school staff is immense."

"But professional curiosity—so vital in keeping children safe—can lead practitioners to feel a fear of causing offense, stress and tension, a lack of confidence, [compassion fatigue](#) and in extreme cases, [traumatic stress](#)."

Katie Cramphorn, Lead Author, says that "professional curiosity is an

authentic interest in the reasons why a child might be showing signs of distress. It's something people in professional roles supporting children and families do without inferring judgment or being "nosey". Curiosity helps to build up a nuanced understanding of complex situations by showing an interest in what life is like for a family, asking questions and listening carefully. Professionals need to feel supported to practice curiosity and keep children safe and well."

The research proposes recommendations for future research and practice in response to the findings presented.

Those in leadership and management roles should carefully consider the [emotional support](#) available to practitioners, and that regardless of setting, those challenged with the complexity of being professionally curious with parents should be provided with appropriate support that engages with their experience on an emotional level.

Support for practitioners should be seen as a vital component in enabling them to display compassion and curiosity, to deal with the myriad of emotions, tension and uncertainty provoked by curiosity and wider child protection. This should not be a question of 'luck'. Failure to embed appropriate support may result in professionals failing to display professional curiosity and, ultimately, experiencing compassion fatigue and emotional burnout.

It is also vital that preventative services, who arguably feel they are dealing with higher and more complex need than ever before, are supported to adapt to conflicts with their professional identity.

Dr. Maynard said that they "are calling for consistent and reliable support for school staff in these safeguarding roles, if professional curiosity is to be used effectively."

More information: Katie Cramphorn et al, The professional in 'professional curiosity'; exploring the experiences of school-based pastoral staff and their use of curiosity with and about parents. An interpretative phenomenological analysis, *Pastoral Care in Education* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/02643944.2021.1977989](https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2021.1977989)

Provided by University of Portsmouth

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