



## 6. Responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm must... be curious, evidence-informed and knowledgeable

### Summary

Responding to the complexity of child exploitation and extra-familial harm requires curiosity, critical thinking and analysis skills, a commitment to reflection and learning, and the thoughtful use of evidence at all levels of the system.

Critical thinking, evidence synthesis and analysis are crucially important in considering multiple sources of information and intelligence in order to:

- build an accurate picture of how child exploitation and extra-familial harm is manifesting in a local area
- understand what is happening in a child or young person's life
- keep up to date with evolving knowledge and research.

In direct practice and in management and strategic partnership activity, curiosity is needed to actively challenge assumptions and consider what is not known, alongside what is known. This kind of approach requires individuals and agencies to acknowledge uncertainty, invite expertise from others, to be creative and to try new things. No single individual or agency can know everything and there are no simple answers.

This approach means using data or research to ask questions, rather than expecting definitive answers. It also means learning from children, young people, their parents / carers and other sources of knowledge and insight within their wider communities, and paying attention to the potential for unintended consequences as a result of professional intervention(s).

### What do we mean by curious, evidence-informed and knowledgeable?

The notion of **curiosity** holds a number of dimensions. In its simplest form, being curious is about wanting to know or learn and, in a professional context, often appears in the phrase 'professional curiosity'. Although widely used, the term is not clearly defined (Thacker et al., 2019) but tends to be attributed to a range of characteristics that manifest at both an individual and organisational level. Burton & Revell (2018) suggest that professional curiosity is a combination of:

- personality traits: including a desire for new knowledge
- attitudes: being tenacious, willing to learn, open to new ideas and interested in other people's stories
- behaviours: seeking a holistic view of a situation

- skills: good communication; critical analysis, literacy about safeguarding legalities and being research-informed.

In contrast, being **evidence-informed** is more clearly defined. The basic premise is about having a rationale underpinned by evidence for work undertaken, to maximise the chance of having positive outcomes. Being evidence-informed means drawing not just on research evidence but also the expertise of professionals and those with lived experience (Staempfli, 2020; Research in Practice, 2003). As Harrison and Graham (2021, p. xvii) describe: ‘Research is rarely the only piece of the evidence jigsaw that practitioners draw on in their practice, and there needs to be a good fit between evidence and context for it to have a chance of making a difference.’ This is especially pertinent in relation to child exploitation and extra-familial harm, which manifests differently depending on the local context (e.g. urban / rural areas) and for which the evidence base in terms of intervention effectiveness is emergent and evolving (Firmin et al., 2022).

Being **knowledgeable** is clearly a very broad descriptor, one that encapsulates the essential ingredients of being a professional, i.e. having the necessary skills and continually learning so as to be able to practise to the best of one’s ability and to deliver the best possible service or care. As such, it can be seen enshrined in statutory safeguarding partners’ professional standards (College of Policing, 2014; Nursing & Midwifery Council, 2018; Social Work England, 2019; General Medical Council, 2019), which also highlight continuing professional development as being a key mechanism through which learning is operationalised.

Research highlights what it means to be knowledgeable in complex contexts (Flyvbjerg, et al., 2012). The distinction between knowledge, craft and practice wisdom maps onto the different kinds of knowledge that is needed for the sensitive and complicated work of responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm. For example, practitioners need to know the evidence base, but they also need to understand how it might apply (whether it is relevant or not) in their local community context, and in the context of work with a specific young person (and family). This requires bringing together holistic knowledge and understanding of the child, young person, their parents / carers and wider networks; professional knowledge of your specific area of expertise as well as practice wisdom from experience of working in the field.

### **Why is being curious, evidence-informed and knowledgeable a Practice Principle?**

Being curious, evidence-informed and knowledgeable are critical attributes for those tasked with responding to the diverse, fast-paced and constantly evolving nature of child exploitation and extra-familial harm. This mindset can help to navigate the complexities of child exploitation and extra-familial harm in several ways. Responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm requires building up a picture of the risk, harms and strengths in a child or young person’s life, paying attention to the perspective of the child, young person and parent / carer (see Practice Principles 2 & 7) alongside research evidence and applied professional wisdom. It involves nuanced understanding of the agency and (constrained) choices of children and young people in these situations, as explored in Practice Principle 3.

Child exploitation, extra-familial harm and wider experiences of trauma (as outlined in Practice Principle 5) can affect how a child or young person interacts with those trying to put protective measures in place. Being curious, evidence-informed and knowledgeable can help avoid making assumptions that result in children and young people not receiving the support they need and can instead facilitate more appropriately targeted responses, through a better understanding of any enablers and barriers to protection at play.

Being curious, evidence-informed and knowledgeable are also invaluable qualities for professionals across the multi-agency partnership, considering what strengths or assets others can bring at a practice level and a management and strategic partnership level. Key enablers are supervision, reflective practice and a positive learning environment (SCIE, 2013; CIPD, 2020; College of Policing, 2022). When working with complexity, ‘the safety valve is reflective practice and external scrutiny of practice via supervisory processes and training to engender rigorous practice’ (Burton & Revell, 2018 p. 1519).

The importance of curiosity, of looking beyond presenting behaviours, challenging assumptions and biases and sharing information effectively with other agencies has repeatedly been highlighted in reviews (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020; Allnock & Rawden, 2020; Independent Review of Children’s Social Care, 2022). The Munro review (2011) noted the risks of children’s social care services being overly bureaucratic and recommended a move from a culture of compliance to a learning culture, where more professional judgement is exercised and expertise is improved through the use of research evidence. This is supported by the evidence about working in complex, adaptive systems, which are poorly suited to traditional performance management approaches of targets and performance indicators (including in commissioning) due to their interconnected nature (Knight et al., 2019; Lowe, 2021).

### **What difference could being curious, evidence-informed and knowledgeable make to responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm?**

Given the complexities of child exploitation and extra-familial harm outlined above, thinking critically, being curious, evidence-informed and knowledgeable are key components of effective responses. For example, there is evidence that taking a checklist approach to assessing risk can be problematic and only partially captures young people’s experiences of child exploitation and extra-familial harm. This underlines the importance of using a more holistic and young person-centred approach to assessment, where professional judgement is applied alongside any tool that is used (Brown et al., 2017; Franklin et al., 2018; Beckett & Lloyd, 2022). If child exploitation or extra-familial harm are experienced during adolescence, understanding brain development and the important function of measured risk during this period is important (Coleman & Hagell, 2022). This knowledge can then help practitioners, partners and parents / carers develop a shared sense of how best to hold risk, in situations where it cannot be eliminated, to which the notion of ‘safe uncertainty’ refers (Hickle & Hallett, 2016; Williams, 2019).

Being curious, evidence-informed and knowledgeable is also about understanding the local context of child exploitation and extra familial harm, asking: ‘What is child exploitation like here and what should we do about it?’ (Godar, 2020, p. 3). Several of the Bespoke Support Projects that TCE carried out with local areas between 2019 and 2022 (e.g., TCE, 2019; TCE, 2021) highlighted the importance of understanding the limitations of existing data sets and the benefits of going beyond ‘traditional’ safeguarding partners (to include community groups, stewards of public spaces, local businesses and education settings, and children and young people themselves) to obtain a more holistic understanding of the scale and manifestations of child exploitation and extra-familial harm (Peace, 2018). This closely aligns with the need for creating safer spaces and places for children and young people (as explored in Practice Principle 8).

Recognising the different forms of information that can help support effective responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm is also important. The role of ‘soft’ intelligence for example, such as the qualitative information gathered in Return from Home interviews. Care must be taken to attend to any ‘unintended consequences’ of sharing such data, given the potentially negative implications in relation to surveillance, trust and disproportionality noted in recent studies (Wroe & Lloyd, 2020). It also requires due consideration being given to balancing rights to privacy and data security with the paramountcy of keeping children and young people safe (Warrington, 2013; 2016; Warrington & Larkins, 2019). This kind of nuanced purposeful practice relies on management and supervision approaches that encourage the use of evidential learning and allow space for reflection.



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