

“Every conversation starts with the child”

Being Curious



I am sure that you have all read Alice's adventures in Wonderland /through the looking glass. I have, a number of times (well maybe seen the film)! But not until now have I considered that Lewis Carroll might have been the original curious thinker???

“Curiouser and curiouser!” Cried Alice (she was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English).” Carroll. L (1871) Alice's Adventures in Wonderland / Through the Looking-Glass.

How many of Alice's musings, or certainly those of the Hatter can we see in systemic thinking??

In a really insightful 'essay' published in the Family Institute Review in 2017, Petra Miles¹ considers her own developing curiosity in line with that of Alice (Lewis Carroll). Miles describes the 'essay' as taking her *'on an adventure to discover my position towards curiosity. How curiosity is essential for conducting a session, and the different ways in which it can be applied. Of great importance to me was to explore the*

¹ Miles P (2017:P13 – 20) Title: What does it mean to be curious? The Family Institute Review 2017 Volume 10.

hazards of closing myself to curiosity; of 'knowing too quickly'. Systemic thinking suggests that if we consider that 'we know' we then stop being curious. This is particularly relevant when writing/updating a single assessment or writing a court report. We need to be curious about what has *changed*, for a child/family and what has been the impact of those changes. How has the 'family story' changed? The information about the family history is important but needs to be in context. Analysis should consider the relevance of the information to the current circumstances and include analysis regarding what has changed/or not.

Miles suggests that Carroll invites her, as the reader, to "engage with the characters' ability to not accept 'truth' at face value; to ask the most simplest of questions in order to gain the most profound and often unexpected answers" (p13). It seems to me that this is a great position for us as social workers to adopt in 'not accepting the truth at face value' of triangulating our information and developing hypothesis.

I was reflecting about the curiosity of children. They learn by watching, listening and asking questions. I wondered how we could learn from children as professionals about being more curious. I thought about our services to children as an 'ecosystem' with a number of different parts which are all interconnected, and which, when one moves or changes so do the others.

Dr Barbara McKay (Institute of Family Therapy), asks us to consider the example of the social care front door: "If you strengthen the front door, what impact do you imagine it would have on other services in social care and on the partner agencies who refer children and families to the front door?"



What impact would there be on a family if they were to do something differently? How might a parent perceive the impact of such a change? We could ask them... "How might (child) behave if you (parent) were to do Y instead of X?"

Being curious is central to implementing our systemic approach in York. Being curious about and with families, about ourselves and each other, about partners and colleagues in meetings and supervision, about the way we deliver our services. "Curious questioning is directly linked with good outcomes in any organisation," (McKay B 2018).

The impact of our curiosity can be to create an environment for social work which embraces openness and collaboration. One in which we are able to develop improved understanding of how families function and where change can be effectively introduced.

Curiosity (as a noun) is described as; '*a strong desire to know or learn something*'. How could your relationships with families change if they understood that the professionals working with them (including you) had '*a strong desire to know or learn something*' about them? How would we work differently if this were our starting point?

Systemic questions:

- **Circular questions** - to help define the problem, understand interactional sequences, assist family members in comparing and contrasting each other's behaviour.
If I was to ask X what the impact of your drinking was, what might they say?
If I asked (child) what they found scary right now, what might they say?
What makes the problem better or worse?
- **Linear questions** - usually begin with Who, What, Where, When, and Why? They are investigative questions that lead up to gaining some insight to the person you are talking to but they don't give a full explanation.
Who was the calmest person in your family when you were a child?
- **Relational questions** - invite the person you're speaking to, to consider a different perspective from their own.
How do people in your family usually talk about things?
Who might notice when...?
- **Questions about difference** - recognise different perspectives and that multiple 'stories' exist within families.
When X and Y argue what does Z do?
What might X think?
- **Questions about beliefs** – consider where these have originated and what underpins them, they can also be a way of challenging fixed thinking.
Where does that idea come from?
What ideas do you have from your family about that?
- **Action questions** - more direct questions that invite people to think about taking an action or reviewing their plan.
What one small step could you make today to change the situation?
If I was there what would I see?

(From; [Using-systemic-questions-in-supervision.pdf](#) (rip.org.uk November 2019).

How can we use curiosity in supervision/meetings/professional conversations?

Dr McKay (2018) suggests that thinking systemically is an essential element of a multi-agency meeting *"If we use a systemic orientation rather than just competing or telling each other that we do not understand where each other is coming from, we can use curious inquiry to understand what is propelling each person into the conversation and what is also holding them back"*. [‘The systemic approach changed our culture of supervision’](#) (communitycare.co.uk)



If we use this approach to consider how we behave in meetings, the questions we ask of each other and our professional challenge to each other, we can expect meetings to be more effective. Recently I had opportunity to 'challenge' a colleague in a meeting regarding their use of the term 'disguised compliance'. I asked my colleague to help me to understand what s/he meant by disguised compliance and then asked them to consider from the parents perspective, whether their lack of capacity to engage with services might be linked to their previous experience of social care involvement and the cultural experiences within the wider family regarding parenting. This led to an enlightening discussion which did not detract from the assessment and analysis of risk but which did enable the meeting to think more about how we might support the parent to engage.

Research in practice in conjunction with colleagues has published a practice tool - [Using systemic questions in supervision](#) ([Using-systemic-questions-in-supervision.pdf](#) (rip.org.uk November 2019) which as its conclusion suggests that;

"Systemic questions can be used in all kinds of situations. They are especially useful in supervision to explore different perspectives, create manoeuvrability and flexibility, open out creative possibilities, as well as gather information. This promotes anti-oppressive practice by encouraging practitioners to take positions of neutrality and curiosity in their work with children and families" (P9).

The tool suggests a number of questions which can support you to be more curious;

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| circular questions | I have recently been doing some work thinking about exit interviews and how we might learn more from colleagues when they leave the local authority or when they move to another post. |
| questions about relationships | |
| questions about differences | I was reflecting on how we might use more systemic questions within exit interviews and create a more curious environment to enhance our learning – maybe you have some ideas? |
| questions about beliefs | |
| action questions | Maybe you have some examples of when you have used systemic questions in your work with children and families or been asked them in your supervision? |
| connecting questions. | Let me know what you think. |

MOMO (mind of my own) have recently changed the resource library password to '[alphabecrispypotato](#) please remember to use this with young people to enable them to share their views.

As ever, don't forget to let me know whether this blog was useful, ideas for future blogs, your feelings about social work in general and social work in York.

Don't forget the diary invitations to the monthly PSW challenge session, please see if you can fit this into your diaries. Sessions are facilitated in conjunction between adult and children's services and an opportunity to chat with colleagues across the Directorate. There is no agenda so it's an open session for us to chat about practice and all things social work.

A Research in Practice podcast went live on Friday. You can find it here: <https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/podcasts/supporting-children-and-families-during-the-pandemic-a-conversation-with-nsppc/>.

Finally, don't forget to complete the children's social care staff survey which is open to ALL colleagues working in children's social care. The survey is open until 29th April, so plenty of time for you to diary in some time – really won't take long!! The survey can be found here: <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/ZGDW5LR>

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| What is going well | What is not going well | What would you like to change |
| Comments | | |

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