



Cumberland  
Safeguarding  
Children Partnership

# A Guide to Having Difficult, But Necessary, Conversations



Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility and where practitioners are concerned, all professionals have a role to play in safeguarding children and young people.

Conversations with parents, carers and other professionals are an unavoidable and important part of your role.

Conversations are necessary. Some are straightforward and easy, while others can be difficult and challenging.

## **Professional Curiosity is a Necessity**

### **We need to be more professionally curious to enable us to:**

- Understand the full picture.
- Ensure that nothing is missed.
- Improve outcomes for children and young people.
- Improve practice.
- Identify disguised compliance.
- Share information more effectively.
- Improve assessments.
- Identify concerns earlier.
- Ensure impactful interventions.

Below are some tips and reflections to support you to be more professionally curious:

### **1. Understanding the Full Picture**

- What assumptions am I making about this child or family, and how might they be challenged?
- Have I explored all possible sources of information, including the child's voice?
- What might I be missing, and why?

### **2. Improving Practice**

- When was the last time I felt uncertain about a case, and how did I respond?
- How do I ensure I remain open-minded and inquisitive in my assessments?
- What strategies do I use to avoid confirmation bias?

### **3. Listening and Communication**

- How do I make sure I hear and understand the views of children and young people?
- Do I give enough weight to the concerns raised by advocates or trusted adults?
- How do I respond when a parent or carer tries to limit access to a child?

## 4. Identifying Disguised Compliance

- What signs might indicate that a family is complying in appearance only?
- How do I test whether real change is happening, not just surface-level cooperation?

## 5. Multi-Agency Working

- How well do I share and receive information with other professionals?
- Are there barriers to effective collaboration, and how can they be addressed?

## 6. Having Difficult Conversations

- What makes me hesitate to challenge a parent, carer, or colleague?
- How do I prepare myself emotionally and professionally for difficult conversations?
- What support do I need to feel more confident in raising concerns?

## 7. Timeliness and Impact

- Have I acted quickly enough to address concerns?
- What impact have my interventions had and how do I know?

Being professionally curious, and having difficult, but necessary, conversations takes courage. These conversations are essential because:

- The views of children and young people can be difficult to ascertain.
- Professionals do not always listen to adults who try to speak on a child's behalf, such as an advocate or trusted adult, who may have important information to contribute.
- Parents and carers can easily prevent professionals from seeing and listening to a child or young person.
- Professionals can believe a story they wish to be true.
- Professionals can be overly optimistic that the plans they made are progressing well.
- Effective multi-agency work needs to be well coordinated.
- Challenging parents or carers (and colleagues) requires knowledge, confidence, time and emotional energy.





# The Skills Needed and Some Top Tips

Have the conversation as soon as possible. Putting off a difficult conversation can leave children in a risky situation and raise your anxiety about the conversation itself.

Speak with Children's Services first if there is suspected sexual abuse, parents could destroy evidence or hinder a police investigation, or it is possible that the child could be silenced.

## Preparation – this is crucial

- Before initiating a difficult conversation, take time to prepare.
- Consider the key points you need to address and gather any necessary information or documentation.
- Think about the parent's perspective and anticipate their possible reactions.
- Ensure you are fully conversant with the necessary policy and procedures you will need to follow and, if possible, have them to hand.

## Appropriate space

- Choose an appropriate, and mutually convenient, time and place to hold the conversation.
- Ensure the space is private and avoid disturbance and distractions.
- Ensure everyone feels safe in the space - consider the position in the room, so no-one feels trapped or looked down upon.

## Try to start with positives, if appropriate

- Highlight any strengths or positive attributes of the child.
- Acknowledge any previous achievements and progress if it is an ongoing situation.
- A positive start can help transition to more difficult topics.



## Use clear language and show empathy

- Avoid jargon.
- Be open and honest.
- Acknowledge parents' feelings.
- Speak in the first person – using “I” and owning the concerns promotes openness and honesty.
- Give clear explanations.

## Active listening

- Allow parents the time to express their thoughts and feelings without interruption.
- Maintain eye contact, nod, and summarise back to them what they say... “I hear you saying that ...”

## Remain calm and professional

- Feelings can run high on both sides, but you must remain calm and maintain your professional approach.
- Avoid becoming defensive or argumentative. It is hard to carry on an argument if the other person doesn't engage in it.
- A good tip is to breath, count to at least 5 internally than speak in a calm, but firm, voice.
- Focus on finding solutions, refer to policy and procedures, if needed.

## Provide specific examples

- This is where good preparation is key. Provide clear examples of when and why you have concerns.
- Remember to keep the child at the centre, avoid blame.

## Know when to take a break and follow up

- As long as the child is not at immediate risk of harm, then it is ok to take a break and agree a time to talk again.

## Explain next steps and/or offer support

- Clarify and summarise, so you make sure that you have heard them right.
- Ensure everyone is clear about the next steps, for example “Sara told me she was slapped yesterday at home, this is worrying, and I have had to speak to children's social care about this. They asked me to talk to you about it and find out what happened”.
- Be straightforward. Tell the parent or carer you are referring to the Cumberland Children Advice & Support Service.
- Make sure you have parental consent, unless the child is at serious risk of harm.
- Avoid excessive reassurance, as things may not turn out alright.
- Do your research before the meeting, so you can be clear about how you or other agencies can support the family.

## Follow up and maintain communication

- Schedule follow up meetings or phone calls.
- Explain how you will keep them informed.
- Be clear about what you expect from the parents with regards to engagement, support for their child etc.

## Some conversation prompts

- Is there a reason why...
- Can we talk about ...
- Daniel has said ...
- I have noticed that ...
- Yesterday a member of staff saw...
- Keeley has an injury on ...
- Can you tell me about ...
- Do you know how ...
- Has anything changed...

| What are we worried about?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | What's working well?                                                                                                           | What needs to happen?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| What words would you use to talk about this issue so that parents would understand? Use plain and jargon free language.<br>Consider any difficulties the family might be having which would making this issue harder to resolve e.g. housing, finance, family breakdown. | Who are the people who care for the child, who help the parents?<br><br>What are the child's achievements in school?           | Now you explored this more how worried are you about the child; 0 is so worried you need to make a safeguarding referral.<br><br>What needs to happen to get to 10? What are the next steps to sorting this out? What can your organisation contribute? |
| Example question?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Example question?                                                                                                              | Things to consider?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| I need to talk to you about the mark on Sara's face, she can't remember how it happened .. Do you know how she did it?                                                                                                                                                   | It sounds like things are a bit difficult for you <u>at the moment</u> , is anyone supporting you ?                            | Cross check what the parent has told you with other professionals.<br>Supervision to reflect on the conversation                                                                                                                                        |
| Mark's behaviour has changed a lot in the last few weeks .. He has gone from being happy and chatty to being quiet and avoiding his friends... have you an idea what might have caused this?                                                                             | You have been doing well to get Omar to school with all that is happening, is there anything we can do to support you further? | Follow the safeguarding procedures.<br>Make a referral to the Safeguarding Hub.<br>Escalate if you are not satisfied with the outcome of the referral and you are still worried.                                                                        |

# Next Steps ...what to do when you have had the conversation?

- Professional curiosity – have you checked with other agencies that what you have been told checks out? Are more enquiries needed?
- Trust your instincts – you know the child and act if you still have concerns.
- Seek out supervision to de-brief and reflect on the conversation.
- Make the referral to Social Care or start an Early Help Plan.
- Escalate – if you are still concerned, you can use the CSCP Escalation Policy, if needed

