

# Courageous & Challenging Conversations

Courageous and challenging conversations are an important feature of safeguarding children. Honest discussions about concerns can be uncomfortable and sometimes difficult to manage. Professionals' own worries or uncertainties about holding these conversations can lead to delay in concerns being discussed or raised and issues being understood or resolved. Sometimes it can also mean that information is taken at face value or assumptions are made, which do not safeguard the well-being and safety of children.

A frequent issue identified in practice reviews has been the lack of effective or sufficient challenge by professionals, including not questioning parent or carers accounts of events, being reluctant to discuss child welfare concerns, and not making use of escalation procedures to explore multi-agency disputes and challenges with other professionals.

## Key terms & concepts



### Authoritative practice

Authoritative practice refers to the collection of skills and attributes necessary for professionals to safeguard children, particularly in the face of hostile or resistant parenting. It is a term used to describe how safeguarding practitioners should work with children and their families, as well as colleagues. The style of practice encourages professional curiosity and taking responsibility for their own role in the safeguarding process. Authoritative practice that includes courageous conversations can support maintaining a respectful uncertainty and respectful challenge of colleagues ensures effective safeguarding.



## **Respectful uncertainty**

The capacity to explore and understand what is happening within a family or situation rather than making assumptions or accepting things at face value, applying critical evaluation to any information received and maintaining an open mind. It is a combination of looking, listening, asking direct questions, checking out and reflecting on ALL the information received (or that could be available to a practitioner).

## **Healthy scepticism**

Safeguarding children can be complex and it can be hard when time and capacity is stretched to 'dig deeper'. However, an approach of healthy scepticism, checking for evidence in support of an explanation, is important to ensure focus on the child and to identify when issues such as disguised compliance are relevant.

## **Professional curiosity**

Professional curiosity is where a practitioner explores and proactively tries to understand what is happening within a family or for an individual, rather than making assumptions or taking a single course of information and accepting it at face value. It involves looking out for evidence of what is really happening. Professional curiosity enables practitioners to build a holistic view of what life is like for a child and use this information to make assessments and decisions. It also enables practitioners to challenge accounts and views, in order to understand a child's vulnerability.

## **Having courageous and challenging conversations**



Professionals may feel nervous or concerned about having challenging or difficult conversations. There may be anxiety about discussing something sensitive, being

seen as being accusatory, or the possibility of a negative reaction. Whilst these concerns should be acknowledged and are natural, they should not prevent necessary conversations from taking place. Professionals must be prepared to hold



challenging discussions with parents, carers and other colleagues alike, as part of their safeguarding responsibilities.

Managing difficult conversations is a skill that can be developed, alongside confidence, through planning, practice and experience.

## **Planning**

When you know you must hold a potentially difficult or challenging conversation planning is an important tool to aid you. Ahead of the conversation prepare by:

- Considering the key points you want to communicate and be heard. What are you worried about and what do you want the conversation to achieve?
- Identify any strengths the person holds that you might be able to highlight in this conversation and have some ideas about how they might draw on these strengths to move through and beyond the current situation.
- Reflect on any concerns or anxieties you have about the conversation. Can you identify why you are concerned? How you will respond should your concerns be realised?
- Use supervision to address any tensions or fears you hold about the difficult conversation and raise any gaps in your knowledge or skills.
- Make a plan of the main points you need to convey - writing it down ahead of the conversation will help you to remember critical information that you need to share.

## **Don't delay**

Schedule the discussion for an appropriate time and place. Some discussions may need to be held very quickly, or even urgently, whilst others may be able to be scheduled in with more time available to prepare. However, difficult conversations have the potential to become more difficult if not dealt with promptly, so raise issues as soon as possible.

Arrange an appropriate place and time to hold the conversation. Be mindful of when will be appropriate for the other person (for example, a parent/carer at the end of the school day may have other commitments/children and be less able to take on information or engage). Ensure you have a safe and private space to have your conversation. This may involve having a colleague or manager with you or nearby, and making sure that others cannot overhear the conversation.



## **Holding the conversation**

### **Set a clear framework and tone for the conversation:**

- Be clear about the purpose of the conversation and what you hope to achieve.
- Do not diminish or undermine the need for the conversation to understand an issue or concern.
- Keep focused on the topic you need to discuss and stay focused on the risk or vulnerability of the child(ren).
- It may help to start with a positive comment about something that is going well.

### **Language:**

- Use clear language which outlines concerns openly.
- Avoid using jargon or acronyms.
- Speak in first person language.

### **Exploring the issue:**

- Keep the conversation flowing by using open questions which cannot be answered with 'yes/no' answers. Begin questions with phrases such as 'why do you think', 'help me understand why', or 'explain to me'.
- Avoid information overload which detracts from the emphasis of key messages you are trying to get across.
- Explain the impact that the identified concern is or could be having on the child(ren).
- Offer perspectives that the other person may not have considered.

### **Interpersonal skills:**

- Share what you need to and then listen carefully and considerately. Give time for them to speak and allow spaces for silence - remember a lot of communication is based on body language.
- Acknowledge feelings that arise and allow the person(s) to express themselves.
- Be empathetic and respond accordingly, without losing sight of the safety and well being of the child(ren).



- Clarify uncertainties within the discussion to avoid misinterpretation. Repeat back what you have heard to allow misunderstanding to be identified.
- Stay objective and keep calm.
- Remain open to the views and interpretations offered, whilst being mindful of professional curiosity and respectful uncertainty.

### **Managing disagreement or confrontation**

You may expect that the person will disagree with you, so be prepared for disagreement by:

- Having facts or evidence ready that support the concerns you are discussing.
- Acknowledge differences of opinion openly.

Ensure that you remain calm and manage your own emotions during the conversation. If the other person becomes angry or confrontational, be clear about what is or is not acceptable, and iterate the purpose of the conversation - to ensure the safety and well being of a child or children.

Be prepared that it may not be possible to reach an agreement - your concerns may not be allayed or understood and you may have to act regardless. It may be necessary to pause the conversation and revisit, or to end the conversation and take other action.

### **Moving forward**

Bring the conversation to a close in a way that leaves all involved clear about what has been discussed, the views that are held (even where these are not agreed), and the next steps following the conversation by:

- Summarising the issue or concern that has been discussed and information you have obtained from the conversation.
- Be clear on the reasons for any particular outcome from the conversation, including actions you may need to take.
- Provide clear information on next steps to avoid any uncertainty.
- Do not make promises that you cannot keep (i.e. confidentiality).

Ensure you record the conversation as soon as possible, to ensure a timely and accurate record. Share this record as appropriate, in line with your organisational policy, and take any actions needed.



## Reflection

After the conversation be sure to take time to reflect on your approach, what worked well and what might have been done differently. Consider how you will be able to build upon this conversation in your next meeting with this person, and in your practice in future.

## Courageous & Challenging Conversation Tool

You may find it helpful to role play the scenario with a colleague or manager (for example during supervision). If time does not allow for this, you may wish to use your plan to rehearse the conversation by yourself, in particular key points you need to convey.

KSCMP have created a simple tool for preparing for courageous and challenging conversations which may be useful. It can be seen in the image and the full document can be found in the [practice resources section of the KSCMP website](#) alongside a completed example.

You may wish to download or print it out and write out your plan ahead of the conversation and review in supervision or with a colleague, or by yourself. You could also use the tool for a hypothetical situation (such as those outlined in the next section), to practice preparing for a difficult conversation.

The form is titled 'Courageous & Challenging Conversation Tool' and includes the Swindon Safeguarding Partnership logo. It contains several sections for reflection and planning:

- What is my goal for this conversation?** (A large empty box for writing.)
- What am I concerned about? (Use simple, clear, jargon-free language)** (A box for writing.)
- Why am I concerned? (What information or facts do I have?)** (A box for writing.)
- What questions do I need to ask & how can I phrase them?** (A large empty box for writing.)
- Are there strengths can I highlight in the conversation?** (A large empty box for writing.)
- Do I have worries about this conversation?** (A box for writing.)
- How can I mitigate or prepare for those worries? (What or who might be able to help me?)** (A box for writing.)

At the bottom, there is a small note: 'Thanks to Kent Safeguarding Children multi-agency partnership who developed this resource and have given permission to use it.'

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## When might courageous or challenging conversations be needed?



### Consent for a Request for Help and Support

If you have concerns about a child then you will need to submit a [Referral form - Request for help and support - Swindon Safeguarding Partnership](#) to Children and Families Contact Swindon. Further guidance and contact details can be found on this webpage [Request for help and support guidelines and contact information - Swindon Safeguarding Partnership](#).

It is a **necessary duty to talk to families and gain their consent before completing the Request for Help and Support**, unless there is a genuine belief that to do so would be unsafe and increase risk to the child.

Practitioners sometimes are concerned that by approaching parents or carers with their concerns, they may jeopardise a working relationship with the family, or cause animosity in ongoing interactions. When a Request for Support is made, families are advised of which professionals have shared concerns - it is far more likely that a relationship with a family will be impacted by making a Request for Support without any discussion or knowledge and them finding out after the fact.

If consent is not given, this does not mean that you cannot submit a Request for Support. Information can be shared without consent in circumstances where:

- There is risk of harm to the individual themselves and/or others, including children.



- There is a serious risk to public health if the information is not shared.
- Information is required by statute or court order.
- The sharing of information is necessary for the prevention, detection or prosecution of a crime.

Further guidance about information sharing and consent can be found on this webpage [Information sharing and consent - Swindon Safeguarding Partnership](#)

### **Professional disputes & challenge**

Professionals may sometimes have concerns about the action or inaction of another agency. Effective working together depends on an open approach and honest relationship between agencies to enable the resolution of disagreements.

Professional challenge is an important aspect of safeguarding and should lead to escalation if concerns are not allayed, to ensure the effective management of risk.

The [Swindon Safeguarding Partnership Adult and Children Resolution Policy \(Escalation Process\)](#) sets out the pathway to be followed in the event of professional disagreements which cannot be resolved between individual practitioners. But the first step should be to discuss concerns with the relevant practitioner at the earliest opportunity.

### **Challenging parent/carer behaviour**

When working with families to make change, there may be times where it is necessary to challenge behaviour of parents or carers, in order to reduce vulnerability or risk to children, for example:

- Exploring accounts given for how an injury has been sustained which are unfeasible given the presentation of injury.
- Highlighting reported behavioural changes which do not align with the evidence or information available.
- Challenging behaviour which is unacceptable or unsafe.

### **Concerns about staff**

Those in positions of authority may be responsible for dealing with allegations or concerns that a person who works with children in either a paid or unpaid (volunteer) capacity has:

- behaved in a way that has harmed a child, or may have harmed a child



- possibly committed a criminal offence against or related to a child
- behaved towards a child or children in a way that indicates he or she may pose a risk of harm to children
- behaved in a way that indicates they may not be suitable to work with children.

In these circumstances, you should ensure you are familiar with the Allegations against those who work with children and the role of the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO)

## **Further resources**

### **Swindon Safeguarding Partnership Resources**

#### **Webpages:**

[Professional curiosity - Swindon Safeguarding Partnership](#)

[Information sharing and consent - Swindon Safeguarding Partnership](#)

[Swindon Safeguarding Partnership Adult and Children Resolution Policy \(Escalation Process\) - Swindon Safeguarding Partnership](#)

[Local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews and Case Learning leaflets - Swindon Safeguarding Partnership](#)

[Think Family Practice Guidance 2025 - Swindon Safeguarding Partnership](#)

[The Right Help at Right Time Guidance - Swindon Safeguarding Partnership](#)

[Courageous and challenging conversations tool - Swindon Safeguarding Partnership](#)

eLearning [Being professionally curious - Swindon Safeguarding Partnership](#)

#### **Other resources**

[Ann Craft Trust: Advice for starting difficult conversations](#)

[Community Care: Tips for coping with difficult conversations](#)

[Leeds Safeguarding Children Partnership: Managing difficult conversations](#)

[Courageous Conversations with Parents - Wigan Safeguarding Children's Partnership](#)