

Thematic
Review

Practitioner Learning Briefing

What do you need to know?

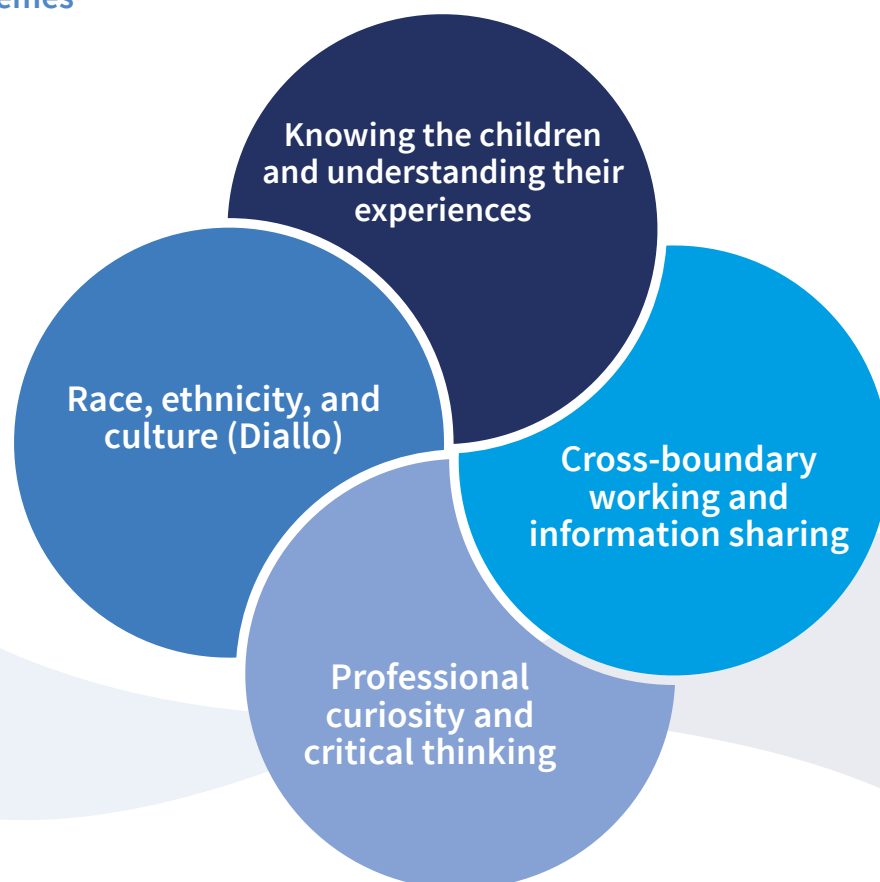
This Practitioner Learning Briefing has been developed following a Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review (LCSPR) that considered the multi-agency response for two children accessing universal services¹. It looked at how agencies shared information across Durham and with other authorities, it also reflected on the importance of how professionals sought information called '**professional curiosity.**'

There was no relationship between the children, but there was similar learning from both situations so the Safeguarding Children Partnership undertook a **Thematic Review**. A thematic review means that broader aspects of practice can be considered where there are similar issues in more than one case.

The purpose of a review is to identify learning and consider what went well and what needs to be improved. Significantly it looks to understand **what this means for practice** and how multi-agency systems and practice can help children and keep them safe.

The following themes supported the analysis of the experiences and circumstances for the children known as Diallo and Katie.

Learning themes



¹ These are services provided to all children and their families regardless of their needs or circumstances, such as GPs, health visiting, education, and leisure services

1. Understanding the Children



Diallo was a Black British African male aged three at the time of the significant incident. He lived with his parents, but his father was away at the time. He died from a fatal head injury. Following his death, he was found to have significant bruising, burns and trauma. The family were not known to statutory services. It became known that the family had lived in three local authorities and Diallo lived with wider family for extended periods.



Katie was a White British female aged two and a half at the time of the significant incident and was living with her mother and her mother's new partner. Katie's parents separated before she was two, and the family were not involved with statutory services. Following her death, it became known that the mother's new partner was known to a neighbouring authority. Katie died after experiencing an abusive head trauma and was found to have multiple bruises.

2. Key Messages

Strengthening respectful enquiry and critical thinking.

The importance of 'whole family' practice where there are adult issues likely to impact children's needs.

The role of fathers, family relationships and men introduced to the household.

Improved responses to domestic abuse involving separated fathers, particularly when they raise concerns about new men in the household.

Recognising opportunities to support timely preventative early help across adult and children's services.

Routine enquiry and consideration about all the children in the household should be made, and where they are so they are visible to services.

Understanding the impact of families that move frequently. How this can affect them accessing services and the increased stresses this can present, particularly for new parents.

Identifying pathways to share information between non-emergency medical care and community services and strengthening the coordination of this preventative early support.

Developing confidence and knowledge across the workforce about race, culture, religion, and aspects of parenting.



The children and families were supported by universal services, the review highlighted a **“number of opportunities where additional support and services could have been offered and helped gain a clearer understanding of the children's lived experiences”** (Thematic Review Nov 2023)

This review highlighted the importance of an approach that is whole-family **and** child-focused.

The Ofsted report into the multi-Agency response to children and families who need help ² is relevant here showing how **“quick access to low-level preventative support can make a big difference to the experience of children and families”**

2 [The multi-agency response to children and families who need help - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/reports/parliamentary-reports/the-multi-agency-response-to-children-and-families-who-need-help)

3. What did we learn?

Theme 1 Knowing the children and understanding their experiences

- This review reflected on two children who were not known to children’s social care but were known to universal services. While there is limited information the services involved were able to give a direct sense of the children.
- There were hidden vulnerabilities in parental /carers’ histories that it is not reasonable to expect were knowable or could be attributed to events.
- However, there were several identifiable vulnerabilities for both children around the number of house moves, changing caregivers, parental mental health, domestic abuse, and parental separation that was known.
- There were opportunities where the vulnerability around these issues, as they arose, could have been explored by the different professionals involved.

“Some children are hidden from statutory services sometimes, whilst families were using a range of public services, the abuse is hidden. Often the serious incident seemingly came from nowhere, with no specific risk factors and no family involvement with statutory agencies. This brings into sharp relief unpredictability of many deaths or serious harm in the context of child abuse”.

(2020 Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel First Annual Report 2019)

4. What does this mean for practice?

The children’s lived experience

Opportunities to offer support to the whole family should not be overlooked when parents are experiencing mental distress and anxiety. Curiosity about the impact on parenting and family functioning is important here.

Practice principle

“A child-centred approach within a whole family focus is fundamental to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of every child” Working Together 2023

The importance of ‘whole family’ practice is key national learning from rapid reviews and highlights the importance of considering all family members and the *‘impact of vulnerabilities within the household’* (CSPRP Annual Report 2022/23)

Appreciating family relationships, particularly about men in the household and their role is an important consideration in supporting parents and understanding any risks. All professionals must enquire and be curious about fathers/male caregivers and their role in children’s lives, irrespective of where they are living.

See important research here about the risks new partners can present:



[The myth of invisible men](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)
(publishing.service.gov.uk)

[Learning from Practice](#)
Learning-from-Practice-Fathers-and-Male-Carers.pdf

3. What did we learn?

Theme 2. Cross-boundary working and information sharing.

- Both children experienced several house moves that included parental separation and changes of carers.
- **Diallo** moved across three local authorities and returned to maternal grandmothers a further two times. Services did not always see him or know where he was. It is important that all children in the household are enquired about and seen.
- **Katie** moved within the authority four times the first move happened within two weeks of her birth.
- Both children were supported by health visitors under the universal pathway³ with no worries identified.
- Intermittent engagement with universal services for the children, compounded by a high turnover of health visitors and the families' moves meant information was not fully evaluated.
- A critical moment for Katie's mum in seeking help occurred when she moved house, the geography of Durham meant a new health visiting team was required.
- Disclosures and worries from separated fathers must be appreciated regarding requests for Domestic Violence Disclosures⁴ and reporting worries to the multi-agency front door and/or the police.
- The importance of triangulating patterns of attendance for non-emergency medical care for adults who have caring responsibility for children.

4. What does this mean for practice?

Seeking and sharing information

Professionals recognise the significance of families that move frequently, particularly across geographical areas. This can mean difficulties or delays in accessing services and information being transferred.

This matters because these moves can lead to increased stress, particularly for new parents. It is important this is appreciated, and conversations are routinely held about the impact on the family and any support they may need.

When children are not visible to services any vulnerabilities and needs may go unnoticed.

All children in the household must be enquired about.

A key practice skill here means

“Keeping an open mind and taking an enquiring approach rather than accepting things at face value... adopting a professionally curious and respectfully uncertain approach.”

The importance of listening and responding to family concerns was highlighted in the recent National Review [National review into the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

Identifying adult issues such as mental health and alcohol misuse can provide additional early support to the family and fully appreciate what the adults and children may need to help them.

In order for professionals to make good decisions about children in need of protection, they have to have a full picture of what is happening in a child's life. Part of this is about having access to all the information known about the child. But just as important is seeking out missing information, considering disparate pieces of information in the round, and asking what bigger picture is being painted about a child's experience. Child Protection in England National Review Arthur and Star 2022

3 Universal services are services provided to all children and their families regardless of their needs or circumstances, for example, health visitors, GP's schools and leisure and community services.

4 [Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme factsheet - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

3. What did we learn?

Theme 3 Professional curiosity and critical thinking

- Information not fully known to services who had contact with the families.
- Some of this information was known and could have led to further enquiry, curiosity and importantly signposting for additional support.
- This meant that professionals were acting in isolation and working with limited appreciation and enquiry.

What got in the way of understanding?

- Enquiring and seeking to understand the number of house moves and its impact on the family
- Exploration and challenge about a child's whereabouts
- Maximising opportunities to engage, support, share information and follow up following mental health episodes and consider the impact on the family.
- Thinking critically about separated parents and the role of fathers and what support could be offered
- Information sharing and curiosity about multiple attendances for treatment and/or care
- Critical reflection and oversight of disclosures of domestic abuse.
- Challenging assumptions and bias regarding gender, ethnicity, and religion and the impact of wider family culture.

4. What does this mean for practice?

Professional curiosity and critical thinking

In this instance, this means how professionals were able and showed an interest in families' lives and used their skills to engage with families through conversations, observations, and information sharing to try and understand what could be happening for a child and family.

The importance of critical thinking and 'authoritative enquiry' is a key component of good multi-agency working. ⁵

This can occur

- With parents/carers
- In supervision, and in
- Interprofessional challenge

Critical thinking allows professionals to challenge attitudes, and assumptions, and encourage reflection.

Tools and guidance to support practice

[Professional Curiosity Resource Library \(durham-scp.org.uk\)](#)

[Re- envisaging professional curiosity](#)

Re-envisaging professional curiosity and challenge: Messages for child protection practice from reviews of serious cases in England - ScienceDirect

3. What did we learn?

Theme 4 Race, ethnicity, and culture

- There was limited information in the records regarding the family's ethnicity, culture, and religion until after the incident.
- Professionals were unsure about the culture and religion of the family meaning that it was not fully considered.
- There was a lack of knowledge about specific cultures and religions, this impacted professionals' confidence in asking about this and aspects of parenting and beliefs that may be related to this.
- The significance of the extended family culture, religion and parenting experiences was not known till after the significant incident.
- Cultural barriers and gender bias were not considered suggesting some unconscious bias.

Gender bias is one of the most common types of bias and professionals need opportunities to reflect on these and consider how this may affect thinking, behaviour, and practice.

4. What does this mean for practice?

Race, ethnicity, and culture

This meant that aspects of the family's identity and culture were silent across services. The importance of the family's racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious identity was not considered. This was a gap in understanding Diallo's experiences and is important that aspects of his home life are explored to consider what life was like for him.

The limited understanding or curiosity about where he was and who was caring for him meant he was not fully noticed and therefore any significance considered. His absence was simply accepted.

What can make a difference?

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's annual reports over the past few years have consistently highlighted that understanding the significance of racial, ethnic, and cultural identity and its impact on the lived experience of children and families is a central practice theme.

Key learning point

Services dealing with domestic abuse allegations must ensure that staff take full account of gender, race, and other individual and wider family characteristics in considering risk and vulnerability.

5. What can you do?

	Ensure that child-centred practice appreciates all adults involved with the child and embraces a 'whole family' approach.
	Explore and identify opportunities to offer support to adults experiencing mental distress and anxiety where they care for children to offer/signpost preventative support in their parenting role.
	Understand the role of men/ fathers/carers within the household and consider the significance of any changes.
	Ensure responses and support for separated fathers are inclusive and worries are fully considered.
	It is important that ALL children in the household are enquired about and considered so they are visible to services.
	Reflect on the impact for children when families move frequently, such as accessing services and increased stress.
	Read and reflect on learning from child safeguarding practice reviews and other evidence-based learning resources and tools to support practice.
	Access training, resources and tools to evidence what works and to reflect and improve your practice, skills, and knowledge. It is ok to ask for support and help in developing an understanding of race, ethnicity, identity, religion, and culture.
	Use supervision to reflect and challenge assumptions and biases. Use critical thinking skills to inform professional challenges.