



Week 1 of 6: 14 October 2026

Over the coming weeks, we'll continue exploring how professional curiosity can help practitioners recognise both temporary and longer-term barriers and ensure that the support we put in place makes a meaningful difference for children.

Revisit our original article:

[Understanding the Barriers to Learning in the Early Years](#)

Earlier this year, we explored the idea of barriers to learning and the importance of looking beyond what we immediately see.

In our original blog, *Understanding the Barriers to Learning in the Early Years*, we considered some of the developmental, emotional, environmental, social and physical factors that can affect a child's ability to engage and thrive.

But the more we have discussed this with settings, the more one point has stood out: Every child can experience a barrier to learning.

Not just children with identified SEND.

Not just children receiving additional support.

Not just children whose needs appear on a plan or register.

Every child.

And sometimes, that barrier may have appeared since yesterday.

What do we actually mean by a barrier to learning?

When we hear the phrase barrier to learning, it is easy to think immediately about something significant or long term.

Perhaps a developmental difference. A communication need. A physical disability. A sensory need. An identified special educational need.

All of these can, of course, create barriers that practitioners need to understand and respond to.

But our thinking needs to go wider.

A barrier to learning is anything that, at that particular point in time, makes it more difficult for a child to access, participate, communicate, regulate, belong or learn.

Some barriers will be longer term.

Some will be recurring.

Some will be temporary.

And some may last for only a day.

That doesn't make them any less real to the child experiencing them.

Sometimes, life simply gets in the way

Imagine a child arrives at the setting on Monday morning.

Their beloved family dog died over the weekend.

For the adults around them, the connection between that experience and the child's behaviour may seem obvious if they know what has happened.

But what if they don't?

Perhaps the child doesn't have the language to explain how they are feeling.

Perhaps they appear quieter than usual.

Perhaps they repeatedly ask when Mummy is coming back.

Perhaps they become upset when another child knocks over something they have built.

Perhaps they don't want to join an experience they normally love.

Perhaps they become angry.

What we see might be described as behaviour, withdrawal, difficulty concentrating or emotional dysregulation.

But those are the things we can see.

They are not necessarily the barrier.

The child may be experiencing grief, perhaps for the first time in their life.

Now consider another child.

Grandad has come to stay for three weeks.

It is a happy event. Nobody is worried. There is no family crisis and certainly no reason to make a referral.

But home feels different.

Bedtime has become a little later. Morning routines have changed. There is another adult responding to the child, perhaps with slightly different expectations or boundaries. The spare bedroom is being used. Breakfast happens differently. Mum and Dad are distracted because there is another person in the house.

For many children, this will have no noticeable impact at all.

For another child, those relatively small changes might temporarily affect their sense of predictability.

They arrive at the setting tired. They find transitions more difficult. They test familiar boundaries. They seek greater reassurance from their key person.

Again, the thing we notice is not necessarily the barrier.

Positive change is still change

This is particularly important.

We can sometimes associate barriers with negative experiences.

But something doesn't have to be bad to temporarily affect a child's capacity to learn.

A new baby arriving can be wonderful and still represent an enormous change in a young child's world.

A family holiday can be exciting while completely changing sleep, food and routines.

Moving house might be something the whole family has looked forward to while simultaneously removing almost everything that was familiar to the child.

A parent getting a new job might be brilliant news while changing who does drop-off each morning.

An older sibling starting school might be celebrated while altering a relationship and routine the younger child has known for as long as they can remember.

Children don't necessarily experience events through the same adult labels of good and bad.

They experience change.

And change can sometimes create a temporary barrier.

Temporary does not mean insignificant

This is where we need to broaden our thinking.

A temporary barrier isn't necessarily something that needs specialist intervention.

It doesn't automatically need a referral.

It certainly doesn't mean that we should attach a label to the child.

It may simply mean that, right now, this child needs something slightly different from us to be successful.

Perhaps they need more connection with their key person.

Perhaps they need a little more preparation before a transition.

Perhaps expectations need to be adjusted temporarily.

Perhaps they need more opportunities to talk.

Perhaps they don't want to talk at all.

Perhaps they need us to recognise that today is simply a harder day.

The skill lies in noticing.

Longer-term barriers matter too — but we still need to be specific

None of this diminishes the importance of persistent or longer-term barriers.

A child may have communication and language needs, physical needs, developmental differences, sensory differences, an identified SEND or circumstances within their life that create an ongoing barrier.

But even here, we need to be careful with our language.

SEND isn't necessarily the barrier.

A diagnosis isn't necessarily the barrier.

“Communication” isn't specific enough either.

We need to understand what is actually making participation or learning more difficult for this particular child.

A child may find it difficult to process lengthy spoken instructions.

Another may communicate very effectively when given visual choices but struggle when adults rely solely on verbal questions.

A child may participate confidently in a small group but become overwhelmed when expected to join a large group.

Another may be physically able to access the environment but find the sensory demands of that environment exhausting.

The more specific we become about the actual barrier, the more meaningful our response can become.

The same experience does not create the same barrier for every child

This might be one of the most important things for us to remember.

Two children can experience exactly the same event and respond completely differently.

Two siblings can experience their parents separating differently.

Two children can start at the same setting on the same day and need very different support.

Two children with the same diagnosis can experience completely different barriers.

Two children can experience the death of a pet and respond in entirely different ways.

That's because we aren't supporting events, conditions or diagnoses.

We are supporting individual children.

So a list of circumstances that might create barriers can be useful in helping practitioners think more widely, but it should never become a checklist that allows us to assume:

This has happened, therefore this child must be experiencing that.

Professional curiosity asks us to remain open.

Professional curiosity: moving from assumption to understanding

Professional curiosity is going to run throughout this six-week series because it is fundamental to understanding barriers.

Being professionally curious does not mean investigating every aspect of a family's life.

It doesn't mean looking for problems.

And it doesn't mean creating a theory about a child and then searching for evidence to prove ourselves right.

It means noticing when something is different and being willing to wonder why.

What am I noticing?

Is this typical for this child?

When does it happen?

When doesn't it happen?

Has something changed?

What is the child communicating to us?

What have their family noticed?

Are other practitioners seeing the same thing?

Could something within our own environment, routines or expectations be contributing?

And perhaps most importantly:

What don't we know yet?

Good professional curiosity leaves room for us to be wrong.

Look beyond the first explanation

Imagine a child who suddenly begins struggling at lunchtime.

They get up repeatedly. They refuse certain foods. They become distressed when encouraged to sit back down.

We could decide that the child is “testing boundaries”.

But what else might we need to consider?

Has something changed at home?

Are they tired?

Have mealtimes recently become difficult outside the setting?

Is the dining environment too noisy?

Is there a sensory element?

Are they uncomfortable?

Are they anxious?

Has something changed within our own lunchtime routine?

There may be a very straightforward explanation. There may be several things interacting.

Professional curiosity doesn't mean we need to discover a complex underlying cause every time.

It simply means we don't stop thinking at the first explanation.

Barriers can overlap

Children's lives don't fit neatly into categories.

One barrier can create another.

A family separation might result in a child moving between two homes.

Different routines might affect sleep.

Poor sleep might reduce the child's capacity to regulate their emotions.

That might make a busy transition more difficult.

The child becomes overwhelmed and pushes another child.

If all we record is:

“Behaviour – pushing during transition.”

we have captured the end of the story, not necessarily the beginning.

Likewise, a child experiencing temporary hearing difficulties may miss parts of what adults say in a busy room. They become unsure of what is expected, watch what other children do, fall behind during a transition and become frustrated when an adult intervenes.

Again, what we see might be behaviour.

But behaviour may be several steps removed from the original barrier.

This is why understanding matters.

What does this child need from us today?

There is a question I'd like us to become more comfortable asking in early years:

What does this child need from us today to be successful?

Not forever.

Not until they leave for school.

Today.

For some children, the answer will be remarkably consistent because their barriers are longer term.

For others, it might change.

And that isn't lowering expectations.

Responsive practice means understanding what enables an individual child to access appropriate expectations successfully.

There is a significant difference between removing an expectation because something is difficult and removing the barrier that is making success unnecessarily difficult.

From noticing to action

Across this series, we're going to use a simple sequence:

NOTICE → GET CURIOUS → UNDERSTAND → RESPOND → REVIEW

NOTICE

What are we actually seeing? Has something changed?

GET CURIOUS

What might be contributing? What else do we need to know?

UNDERSTAND

What appears to be the specific barrier for this child, rather than simply the presentation we can see?

RESPOND

What can we change, adapt, introduce or provide that might reduce that barrier?

REVIEW

Did it work? What changed? Does the barrier remain? Has it evolved? Do we need to do something differently?

That final stage matters.

Because identifying barriers isn't the objective.

Reducing them is.

Every child means every child

Perhaps this is the thought to take away from Week 1.

A Barriers to Learning Register should not simply become another way of recording children with SEND.

If we genuinely believe that every child can experience a barrier, then our thinking needs to reflect that.

Some children will experience barriers requiring sustained, coordinated support. Others may experience something temporary that practitioners notice, understand and respond to before it ever becomes a significant concern.

Both matter.

The purpose isn't to find a barrier for every child.

It is to create a culture in which practitioners are sufficiently attuned to children that when something does get in the way, we notice.

And then we do something meaningful with what we have noticed.

Over the next five weeks, we're going to look much more closely at what this means in practice: why what we see isn't always the barrier, how children's experiences outside the setting can affect them within it, whether our own environments and expectations sometimes create barriers, and how professional curiosity can help us move from assumption to understanding.

Because sometimes the most important question we can ask isn't:

“What's wrong?”

It is:

“What's getting in the way?”

