

Week 2 of 6: 21 October 2026



WEEK 2 OF 6

What We See Isn't Always the Barrier.

Sometimes what we notice first is simply the child's response to it.



What's Getting in the Way?

Notice. Understand. Respond.

This blog is part 2 of Marathon Early Years Consultancy's six-week series.

Last week, we explored how every child can experience a barrier to learning.

This week, we consider why what we see isn't always the barrier.

Last week, we started with a simple but important principle:

Every child can experience a barrier to learning.

Some barriers are longer term. Some are recurring. Some are temporary. Some might exist for only a day.

We also introduced the thinking that will run throughout this series:

NOTICE → GET CURIOUS → UNDERSTAND → RESPOND → REVIEW

This week, we want to concentrate on that first observation — because what we notice first is not necessarily the barrier we need to address.

Sometimes, it is simply the child's response to it.

If you missed Week 1, it builds on our original article about barriers to learning and explores why barriers shouldn't automatically be associated with SEND or longer-term needs.

[Read the original blog: Understanding the Barriers to Learning in the Early Years](#)

This Week — Week 2

What are we actually seeing?

A child hits another child.

A child repeatedly says no.

A child stops joining group experiences.

A child who usually separates confidently begins crying at the door.

A child starts throwing their food.

A child pushes another child away whenever they approach their play.

A child who previously managed transitions begins hiding when it is time to tidy up.

These are all things we can observe.

And because they are visible, they can quickly become the focus of our response.

We might introduce a behaviour strategy.

We might remind the child of expectations.

We might create a visual timetable.

We might decide they need support with sharing.

We might change where they sit.

Sometimes, one of those responses will be exactly what the child needs.

But before we decide what to do, perhaps we need to ask a different question:

What if the thing we are trying to change isn't actually the barrier?

Behaviour is information

Behaviour can tell us something.

But it doesn't always tell us why.

Imagine a child who has suddenly started pushing other children away when they approach something they are playing with.

We might initially think:

They are struggling to share.

That could be true.

But suppose their parents recently separated.

The child is now moving between two homes. Some of their belongings travel with them. Familiar routines have changed. There may be things they expect to find in one place that are now somewhere else.

Could their response to another child approaching something that currently belongs to their play be connected to a greater need for control, predictability or security?

Perhaps.

But this is where professional curiosity needs to be handled carefully.

We haven't discovered **the answer**.

We have discovered **another question**.

There is a danger that once adults know something significant has happened in a child's life, every behaviour gets attributed to it.

"It's because Mum and Dad have separated."

Perhaps it is.

Perhaps it isn't.

Professional curiosity means holding information in mind without allowing it to become a conclusion before we have understood the child.

Look for the change

One of the most useful questions we can ask is:

What is different?

Not just *what is the child doing differently?*

What is different **around the child?**

If a child has always found transitions difficult, we may be looking at something very different from a child who has managed transitions confidently for six months and suddenly begins struggling.

If a child has always eaten well at the setting and suddenly refuses lunch, what changed?

If a child who usually seeks out their friends begins choosing to play alone, what changed?

If a child who has always separated happily suddenly needs their key person close throughout the morning, what changed?

Sometimes, the answer will be within the setting.

A member of staff is absent.

The room has been rearranged.

The children have moved to a different space.

The lunchtime routine has changed.

The child's key person has altered their working pattern.

A familiar group of children has changed.

At other times, something may have changed beyond the setting.

A new sibling.

A parent working different hours.

A grandparent staying.

A house move.

A family separation.

A bereavement.

A pet dying.

An older sibling starting school.

A period of poor sleep.

Sometimes we may never know precisely what changed.

That doesn't prevent us from responding thoughtfully to what the child is communicating.

The child who suddenly won't let Mum leave

Imagine a three-year-old who has attended the setting for almost a year.

She usually arrives happily, waves goodbye and heads straight towards the construction area.

Then something changes.

She begins holding tightly onto Mum at the door.

She cries when Mum leaves.

For the first hour of the morning, she repeatedly asks:



“Is Mummy coming back?”

If we focus only on separation, we might decide that we need to restart settling strategies.

But professional curiosity asks us to understand what has changed.

Perhaps Mum recently spent several nights away caring for a relative.

Perhaps a family member has been unwell.

Perhaps Mum has returned to work and another adult is now completing some familiar routines at home.

Perhaps the child recently heard adults talking about someone dying and is trying to understand what it means when somebody “goes away”.

Or perhaps none of those things are happening.

Our role isn't to create the most complicated explanation.

It is to notice that **something has changed for this child** and remain curious about what support she needs.

What happens before, during and after?

Context matters.

A child who “struggles with behaviour” throughout the day gives us very little information.

A child who consistently becomes distressed during the transition from outdoors to indoors gives us something much more useful to explore.

What's happening immediately before?

How much warning does the child receive?

What are they being asked to leave?

Where are they expected to go?

Is the indoor environment significantly noisier?

Are several adults giving instructions?

Does the child understand what happens next?

Are they hungry?

Are they tired?

Does this happen at every transition, or only this one?

What happens when a familiar adult supports them?

What happens on quieter days?

Suddenly, instead of trying to fix **the child's behaviour**, we have several possible barriers we can explore.

When doesn't it happen?

This question is just as important as asking when something does happen.

If a child communicates confidently with their key person but rarely speaks during a large group, that tells us something.

If they manage lunchtime comfortably when there are six children at the table but struggle when there are ten, that tells us something.

If they join an experience when they can observe first but withdraw when expected to participate immediately, that tells us something.

If transitions are successful when one particular adult leads them but difficult with another, that tells us something too.

We can become so focused on moments of difficulty that we overlook the moments of success.

Yet success gives us clues.

What's different when this child is able to participate successfully?

That might tell us far more about what they need than repeatedly analysing the times when they struggle.

Be careful with the words we use

Language shapes thinking.

Consider the difference between:

"He refuses to tidy up."

and:

"He becomes distressed when asked to stop an experience without warning."

Or:

"She won't sit at lunchtime."

compared with:

"She leaves the table when the noise level increases."

Or:

"He doesn't listen."

compared with:

"He follows a one-step instruction when the adult is close to him but appears to miss instructions given to the whole group."

The second description in each example doesn't make an assumption about motivation.

It describes what happened.

That gives us something useful to think about.

Words such as *refuses, naughty, attention-seeking, difficult, stubborn* or even *won't* can inadvertently suggest that we already understand the child's intention.

Often, we don't.

Observation should help us **open up our thinking**, not close it down.

What if the obvious explanation is wrong?

Imagine a child who has begun throwing food at lunchtime.

The immediate response might be about boundaries.

Food stays on the plate.

That may still be an entirely appropriate expectation.

But what if we become curious?

Has the child recently started doing this?

Do they throw all food or particular textures?

Does it happen immediately or towards the end of the meal?

Does it happen at snack?

Does it happen when the room becomes noisy?

Are portions overwhelming?

Is the child able to communicate that they have finished?

Has anything changed at home around food?

Are they uncomfortable sitting where they are?

Do they know what to do when they no longer want something?

The expectation that food isn't thrown hasn't disappeared.

But our understanding of **why it is happening** might completely change the support we put around the child.

This is an important distinction.

Understanding a barrier doesn't mean removing every expectation

Being curious about behaviour does not mean that anything goes.

Children need predictable adults, secure routines and appropriate boundaries.

If a child hits another child, we still keep everybody safe.

If a child throws food, we still support appropriate mealtime expectations.

If a child damages something, we still respond.

Understanding **why** something is happening doesn't mean ignoring **what** is happening.

It means our response can address both.

We can hold the boundary while also asking what support the child needs to succeed within it.
That is very different from simply responding to the behaviour over and over again.

Could the adult response become part of the barrier?

This is worth thinking about.

Imagine a child becomes overwhelmed during a transition.

An adult repeatedly says:

“Come on. Everyone else is ready. You know what you need to do. Coat on. We need to go. Come on.”

The adult is trying to help.

But if the child's barrier involves processing language, anxiety, sensory overload or difficulty shifting attention, adding more language and pressure may make the transition harder.

The child becomes increasingly distressed.

The adult gives more instructions.

The child becomes more distressed.

Eventually, we may describe the child as having *“a difficult transition.”*

But we need to be brave enough to ask:

Did our response reduce the barrier, or did it unintentionally add another one?

We will explore environments, routines and adult practice much more deeply later in this series.

But professional curiosity must include curiosity about **ourselves**.

Don't forget the quiet children

Not every barrier announces itself through behaviour that adults find challenging.

Sometimes the child experiencing a significant barrier is remarkably easy to miss.

The child who watches but rarely joins.

The child who copies everyone else.

The child who smiles and nods when they haven't understood.

The child who always chooses the same familiar experience.

The child who lets another child answer.

The child who waits for an adult to do something for them.

The child who quietly follows the group.

These children may not disrupt a routine.

They may not trigger a behaviour conversation.

They may not immediately cause adults concern.

But that doesn't necessarily mean there is no barrier.

Professional curiosity isn't only for the moments when something goes wrong.

It is also about noticing **who isn't fully accessing what is available**.

Observation before interpretation

A useful discipline for teams can be separating:

What do we know?

from:

What do we think it might mean?

For example:

We know:

A child has left the lunch table on four occasions this week when the room became particularly busy.

We wonder:

Whether noise, length of mealtime, seating position or something else might be contributing.

That is very different from recording:

“Child doesn't like busy mealtimes.”

We haven't established that yet.

Another example:

We know:

A child has asked repeatedly when Dad is collecting them since Dad began working away during the week.

We wonder:

Whether the recent change in family routine is affecting their need for reassurance and predictability.

Again, we aren't diagnosing the child's emotions.

We're using what we know to guide thoughtful support.

Talk to families, not about them

Families often hold a vital part of the picture.

That doesn't mean we need to ask intrusive questions.

Sometimes a simple observation opens the conversation:

“We've noticed that Jamie has needed a little more reassurance at drop-off this week. Have you noticed anything similar at home?”

Or:

“Amira has seemed particularly tired around lunchtime over the last few days. We just wanted to check in and see how things have been at home.”

That is very different from approaching a parent with a conclusion.

“Jamie has separation anxiety.”

“Amira isn't coping with lunchtime.”

We share what we have observed.

We listen.

We bring information together.

And sometimes a parent will say:

“That makes complete sense. The dog died on Sunday and she keeps asking whether everyone is going to disappear.”

Suddenly, we understand something we couldn't possibly have known from observation alone.

One barrier can create another

As we explored last week, barriers rarely sit neatly in isolation.

Consider:

Family separation

- different routines and two homes
- disrupted sleep
- reduced capacity for regulation
- busy transition becomes harder
- child pushes another child.

If our starting point is:

“How do we stop the pushing?”

we may spend a great deal of time addressing the final behaviour while missing everything leading up to it.

Or:

Temporary hearing difficulty

- misses parts of group instructions
- watches other children to work out what to do
- falls behind during transition
- adult assumes they aren't listening
- additional verbal instructions are given
- child becomes overwhelmed.

What we see at the end may be frustration.

But frustration isn't necessarily where the story began.

Professional curiosity isn't about finding a hidden problem

There is an important balance here.

If we encourage practitioners to look beneath behaviour, we must also avoid creating a culture in which every small change becomes evidence that something serious must be happening.

Sometimes a tired child is simply tired.

Sometimes a three-year-old doesn't want to tidy up because they are deeply engaged in what they are doing.

Sometimes children become cross.

Sometimes children have difficult mornings.

Childhood doesn't need to be pathologised.

Professional curiosity is not about turning ordinary childhood experiences into concerns.

It is about noticing **patterns, changes, context and impact** and responding proportionately.

Sometimes our curiosity will lead to a significant discovery.

Sometimes it will lead to a small adjustment.

Sometimes it will lead us to decide that no additional action is needed at all.

All three can represent good practice.

Notice → Get Curious → Understand

This week, our five-part process begins to come alive:

NOTICE

Describe what you can actually see without immediately interpreting it.

GET CURIOUS

When does it happen? When doesn't it? What changed? What happens beforehand? What do others notice?

UNDERSTAND

Bring together what you know. What might the actual barrier be? What remains uncertain?

Then — and only then — can we make a thoughtful decision about how to **RESPOND**.

And after that, we must **REVIEW** whether our response actually helped.

A question for your team this week

Perhaps take one observation, behaviour or concern that your team is currently discussing.

Don't immediately ask:

“What are we going to do about it?”

Instead ask:

“What do we actually know?”

Then:

“What are we assuming?”

And finally:

“What else might we need to understand before we decide what this child needs?”

Those three questions could completely change the conversation.

Because the first thing we notice is important.

But it isn't always the barrier.



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