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Wising Up on Kids "Why" Questions

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“Why do birds fly?”

“Why is there war?”

“Why can’t I stay out late?”

Whether spoken by a toddler or a teen, the word “Why” is often the opening shot in a barrage of questions that can leave parents feeling exasperated and short on patience. More often than not, whatever the parent says, the child’s response is another “Why?”

Kids have their own reasons for dreading the word “Why.” Very frequently, it serves as the launching pad for critical or accusatory questioning:

“Why can’t you sit still?”

“Why don’t you ever listen?”

“Why did you do that?”

These questions are less requests for information than expressions of parental anger and a form of verbal punishment. The resounding message of disapproval triggers the child’s sense of shame or defensiveness, shutting down communication and interfering with the opportunity to learn from mistakes.

Although we can’t entirely eliminate the word “Why” from our vocabularies, better questions will lead to clearer communication and truly teachable moments.



When “Why?” means “I’m curious”

Early in life, children use “Why” questions to pursue their innate and insatiable curiosity about the world. A 2009 University of Michigan study of children between the ages of 2 and 5 found that “Why” questions are motivated by a genuine desire to gain understanding. Repeated questioning essentially means, “I still don’t get it. Try again.”

Young children are aggressive researchers, and their relentless questions can exhaust parents if we believe our role is to provide all the answers. Fortunately for us, that is not the case. Children actually benefit from observing that their parents are not all-knowing and all-capable, but rather life-long learners eager to discover new things. This is an especially powerful lesson when parents engage children as full partners – and even leaders – in the pursuit of knowledge. Instead of providing information, parents can redirect the child’s question back to her: “That’s a great point. I wonder why that is. What do you think? How can we find out?” Assuming a friendly tone of voice and body language will help convince the child that you are not merely deflecting her question, but expressing interest in her ideas and confidence in her abilities.

The same strategy is effective when kids question the family’s rules and values. When a child asks why he can’t have or do something, try redirecting the question in a friendly and engaged manner. “I’m so glad you asked that question. How do you suppose we decided to do things this way?” If it is a policy that relates to health or safety concerns, you can partner with the child in exploring relevant information in books or online so that he has the opportunity to weigh the evidence for himself and gain a better understanding of the reasons behind the rules.

When “Why?” means “I want your attention”

A fringe benefit of redirecting “Why” questions is that it short-circuits children’s inappropriate attempts to monopolize their parents’ attention through relentless questioning. By refusing to assume sole responsibility for providing answers and instead keeping the child in charge, parents avoid reinforcing a negative attention-seeking habit. Children learn that they cannot hold their parents hostage with idle questioning and will be expected to pursue their own answers (with their parents’ support and encouragement).

When “Why?” means “Do I really have to?”

As children pass the toddler and preschool years, they increasingly use “Why” questions as a way of asking “Whether.” They aren’t so interested in why they have to clean their room, wear a nice outfit to the party or come home by 10:00, as they are to know whether there is a chance of wiggling out of the requirement. Rather than a reason, they are looking for a reprieve. Roping parents into a debate allows kids to procrastinate and perhaps even wear us down to the point of giving in. It is important in these situations to make clear that any discussion comes after compliance:

“When you have finished the card, I will be happy to explain why we write thank you notes.”

“After you finish taking out the trash, we can discuss the chore assignments.”

Whether or not the follow-up discussion is requested, you have demonstrated that asking “Why” will not buy time or provide an easy way out.

When parents ask “Why?”

Children learn everything they know – how to walk, talk and get along in the world – through trial and frequent error. They live in the moment and choose to do things because they feel like it in that moment. Only after repeatedly making mistakes (sometimes the same one, over and over again) do children learn to anticipate the consequences of their actions.

When parents ask “Why?”, the most honest answer a child can give in most cases is “I don’t know” or “Just because I felt like it.” Asking “Why?” is counterproductive because it encourages children to make excuses or cast around for someone else to blame. It implies that the parent expects the child to rationalize his past behavior when what we really want is for him to analyze what went wrong, make amends for any harm done and find solutions leading to better outcomes in the future.

Asking better questions

It is more effective to ask questions that encourage children to take responsibility for their actions by reconsidering their poor choices:

Did that work out the way you planned?

If you could start over, what would you do differently?

That didn’t seem to go so well. How do you think you can fix things?

Unlike “Why” questions, these less confrontational, more reflective queries avoid punitive shaming and blaming and keep the focus on personal responsibility. With repetition, they will become internalized questions that children instinctively ask themselves whenever they make mistakes.

Kicking the “Why” habit is one crucial way for parents to provide children with the tools they need to continually assess and improve their behavior and their understanding of the world. Isn’t that what parenting is all about?

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