

Why to not ask “WHY”?

Think of the following scenarios and as you go through them, pay attention to how you *feel* as you read them (does your stomach get tight? does your jaw lock? do you feel tense?):

- You are a teacher at work. You are monitoring the playground, following the rules, doing your thing, when your supervisor walks up to you and says, “*Why* are there three boys standing over by the basketball court?”
- You are working at a hospital and take the HIPPA rules very seriously... another employee is nearby. When the phone rings, you accidentally leave some confidential paperwork lying on a counter when you answered the telephone. Another employee says to you, “*Why* did you do that?”
- You are at home watching television with your spouse or a friend. They go to the refrigerator to get a cold can of soda only to find that the sodas are still in the 12-pack box on the counter. They say to you, “*Why* aren’t there any cold sodas in the refrigerator - again?”
- You are complaining to a friend about how your child simply won’t follow through with his or her chores. She says to you, “*Why* don’t you do this or *Why* don’t you do that?”

Most people, when asked “*WHY*” experience some form of defensiveness. They may feel angry and experience tension somewhere in their body. They may feel intimidation or fear and experience anxiety. The bottom line is: when someone is asked “*WHY*”, they usually feel as if they have to provide some sort of rationale for what they have done. Even if there is no real need to (in other words, even if the person has done nothing wrong) – the word *WHY* itself elicits a defensive posture. A person may feel as if they are being *blamed* or *accused* of something when they are asked “*Why*”.

When we talk to others, it is VERY important that we try to refrain from using the word “*Why*”. There are several reasons for this. As noted, the word “*Why*”, when used to question someone, leads to a defensive posture or reaction. God knows, most people are *already* defensive when it comes to responding to questions. Our goal (hopefully) is to get the person we are talking to to open up to us and give us information. If they feel they are being accused before they even have a chance to speak (i.e., if “*Why*” is the first thing out of our mouth), it is unlikely we will have a very productive, positive conversation. More specifically, asking a person “*Why* did you do that?” is a sure way to get them to shut down.

When we ask the question “*Why*”, we may be wanting the child the other person to take responsibility for whatever it was they did – or that we think they did. We

may truly be perplexed about what another person was thinking when they did something and sincerely do want to know *why*. It is probably a good idea to work at finding other ways to find out what you want to know. For example:

If you wanted to know *why* the a child, for example, may have stolen a CD from the store, you are probably confused as to how they could do something like that knowing the consequences they could face

- you are probably genuinely concerned about if there is something bothering the child and, if so, want him to talk about it
- you are probably somewhat angry that they did that
- and more than likely, you want the child to open up and talk about what made him steal (*why*)

In a situation like this, the best thing to do is to ask questions that begin with *WHAT* and *HOW*....

- *What* sorts of things were you thinking about as you were walking around in the store before you took the CD?
- *What* were you feeling at the time you took it?
- *What* would have helped prevent this from happening?
- *How* do you think this incident affected other people?
- *How* can you prevent something like this from happening in the future?
- *How* might other people have been affected by your actions?

Asking questions like this will allow a child to TALK to you. He doesn't feel like he is being JUDGED when these types of questions are asked. He is given the opportunity to say what is on his mind. *What* and *How* questions are called "Open-Ended" questions because they lead to some sort of response other than "Yes" or "No". The response can lead anywhere... open-ended. You can get a LOT more information from a child (and adult) when you use *What* and *How* questions when talking with them.

Of course, these words can also be abused in a shaming manner. AVOID using them in this way at all costs... unless you're looking for a fight. For example, refrain from saying "*What were you thinking?*", "*How could you do this to me?*", "*What are we going to do with you?*", etc. I think you get the drift...

Think about the situation with the boy stealing the CD away again. You are still wanting the same information – to clear up your confusion, to express your concern and possibly your anger, and to get the boy to open up to you and tell you what was going on with him. Imagine his responses if you used these questions instead of the *What* and *How* questions above....

- *Why* did you steal that CD?
- *Why* didn't you stop to think about how your behavior would affect your mother?
- *Why* did you think you'd get away with something like this?

These sorts of questions would likely make anyone angry and defensive... We need to be careful when we choose our words. Think about what your goal is when you are talking (Do you want the person to take ownership of some behavior? Do you want them to share their thought process with you? Do you simply want to have a lighthearted conversation?). Think about your goal and think about what words are most likely to lead to that desired goal? Rarely, I think, will the question “*WHY?*” be a part of your conversations.

Think back to the situations noted at the beginning. Remember how you felt in response to the questions asked relative to each situation. NOW...lets do each situation again, this time using *What* and *How* questions.

- You are a teacher at work, following the rules, doing your thing, when your supervisor walks up to you and, instead of saying, “*Why* are there three boys standing over by the basketball court?” says, “*What* do you suppose those three boys are doing standing over there by the basketball court?”
 - This sort of question does not sound accusing and does not call for a nervous, defensive response.
- You are working at a hospital and take the HIPPA rules very seriously... another employee is nearby. When the phone rings, you accidentally leave some confidential paperwork lying on a counter when you answered the telephone. Another employee says to you, “*Why* did you do that?” If this other employee had said, “What sorts of potential consequences might take place by leaving confidential paperwork lie about?”, you would still likely feel bad, but at least you could think about what happened and would be more open to learning from your mistake.
- You are at home watching television with your spouse or a friend. They go to the refrigerator to get a cold can of soda only to find that the sodas are still in the 12-pack box on the counter. If, instead of saying to you, “*Why* aren’t there any cold sodas in the refrigerator - again?”, they said “What could I do to help remind you to put sodas in the refrigerator when they are all gone?”....
 - Again, you would probably feel some guilt or embarrassment, but you would be more likely to admit that you did this rather than to get into a fight about “who does what more often” etc...
- You are complaining to a friend about how your child simply won’t follow through with his or her chores. If she says, “How do you think your son or daughter would respond if you....did this or that?” instead of saying, “*Why* don’t you do this or *Why* don’t you do that?”

- You would likely stop and think more about the situation rather than getting mad at your friend for “telling you what to do”....

Your kids *will* open up to you... part of helping them do so is by learning some proven methods of communication and then *using* these when we converse with them.