

INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose - No. 1 parenting educator



Ask WHAT when kids act up



"Asking WHY when kids misbehave generally closes down a conversation and puts them on the defensive. There's a better question to ask when kids behave poorly. Ask a question beginning with 'WHAT?'"

'WHY.....?'

'Why on earth did you do that?'

Most of us have said this to our kids at some stage.

They hurt a sibling and we say, 'Why?'

They argue and fight at the meal table and we say, 'Why?'

They deliberately come home from an outing later than agreed and we say, 'Why?'

This is a natural reaction. But often kids can't articulate why they have done the wrong thing. Boys, in particular, will usually reply, 'I dunno.' They know something isn't right, but articulating it is another matter.

Besides, asking WHY is pointless.

Even if they give you a reason for their poor behaviour ('cos she hit me first', 'I'm not hungry anyway', 'I was late because I lost track of time') where do you go to from there?

Asking WHY when kids misbehave generally closes down a conversation and puts them on the **defensive**.

There's a better question to ask when kids behave poorly. Ask a question beginning with 'WHAT?'

Okay, your first reaction to misbehaviour maybe 'What the.....' but hold that thought in. Better to ask questions such as:

- **WHAT were you thinking when you hurt your sister?**
- **WHAT were you doing when you decided to stay out late?**
- **WHAT was happening when you argued with your friend?**
- **WHAT should you have done when you didn't want to eat and decided to annoy your sister?**
- **WHAT will you do next time when you feel like acting like that?**
- **WHAT do you think your brother meant when he said that you were.....?**
- **WHAT will you do now to make it up to your brother?**

These types of questions are **reflective** and **restorative**.

They require children to reflect on their thinking, their behaviour and the situation at hand. This opens up conversations that lead to learning.

Effective discipline helps children learn better ways of behaving. Some of the questions lead children to the important aspect of repairing or **restoring** relationships they may have damaged through their behaviour and so take some responsibility for the way they acted. Taking responsibility and making amends is another vital aspect of discipline.

Importantly, asking **what?** when kids' misbehaviour impacts on others leads them further down the road from **self interest** to **social interest**, where they consider the well-being of others. It's also in line with the types of questions teachers are asking your children when their behaviour adversely affects others.



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