

Children's Motives - Your Child's Behavior

Why Did You Do That? The Most Fruitless Question A Parent Can Ask.

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Picture this: You walk in to your family room. A moment ago it was a peaceful scene, with your two children playing quietly. Now all is chaos. Your 1 year old is squalling, milk and cereal dripping down his face. The dog is happily lapping up the puddle of milk and cereal that made it to the floor. Your 4 year old is standing there, a guilty smile on her face, her milky spoon still in her hand. And what do you do? You look at your 4 year old and demand, "Why did you DO that?" And what does she say? "I don't know." Or worse, "Because."

Here is the real answer: She probably doesn't know and you will never know. Maybe your 1 year old actually deserved it. Maybe your 4 year old wanted to see what the baby looked like with milk on his face. Maybe the devil told her to do it. Bottom line: it doesn't matter. Asking why is the most fruitless question you will ever ask.

Frederick Perls – father of Gestalt Therapy – states in his book *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*, "I know you want to ask why...to get rationalization or explanation. But the why at best leads to clever explanation,...never to an understanding." He goes on to say that every event has many causes. All kinds of factors and experiences come together to create the moment that is now and the person that is your child at this moment in time.

Give up on why. Trying to pinpoint the motive(s) of your child's behavior is a futile exercise, and one guaranteed to cause you grief. Look instead at the now and the how. Now is all that truly exists. The past is gone, the future yet to be. How describes the structure of Now, and includes behavior and everything else that is happening in the moment.

Let's go back to my opening example. The Now you encounter is your 1 year old with milk and cereal and tears on his face, your dog lapping up the mess and your 4 year old standing there with her spoon in her hand. It is definitely her cereal all over your 1 year old. A better question to ask is, "What happened here?"

In Gestalt Therapy theory, we always respond to the most pressing unfinished situation first. As I see it, the crying baby with the milk and cereal all over him is the most pressing need to be attended to. Pick him up, clean him off and comfort him. All the while listen to your 4 year old if indeed she is speaking at all. Give her a towel to help you clean up the mess on the floor, but do not yell at her. Use this time to calm yourself – and everyone else – down.

When you are finished cleaning up and your 1 year old is calmer, look directly at your 4 year old and ask her again to tell you how the milk and cereal got all over the baby. She may tell you a story about how the baby was bugging her or crying or grabbing for the cereal. Perhaps she will even tell you she got mad and poured the cereal over the baby's head. Maybe not. You are not looking for justification here, just a recapping of what happened when you were out of the room. If she is unable or unwilling to talk, do not force the issue.

At this point you can talk to her about using words when she is angry or calling to you for help if the baby is bugging her. You can also tell her that pouring cereal over her brother's head is never an option. If it is blatantly her fault, a 3-4 minute time-out may be necessary. What is really of no real importance is the why. Her actual behavior is now the most important unfinished situation to deal with, not why she did what she did. She is testing out her world and trying out new behaviors and you are there to help her learn what the acceptable limits are in any given situation.

Many valuable minutes, hours, and sleepless nights are wasted on trying to assign motives to children's (and adult's) behavior. "She's jealous...she's angry...she's mean...she's manipulative...she's tired." Any or all may apply. The motive is the why. The behavior is the how. It is not up to you to discern the true motive and then pass judgment upon that motive. Ignore the motive and focus on the behavior. You have no right to tell her what to feel. You do have the right to correct her behavior. See the difference?

Why should you do what I tell you to do?
Because...