



Understanding Is Not Enough

In the course of normal childhood behaviour, children misbehave. When they do, some parents opt to clarify the expectation of appropriate behaviour and seek to hold the child accountable. If the child misbehaves again, the child may receive a consequence such as time out, loss of a privilege, early bedtime or the like. The kid gets the point and behaviour settles down.

On the other hand, there are other parents who ask why; “Why did you do what you did?” These parents seek to understand their child’s motivation believing they will then be able to discuss the child’s motivation and talk them out of engaging in the misdeed again. They look for a common sense understanding to have a meeting of the minds with their child. Unfortunately, most children, even to adolescence, do not have a keen awareness of their motivation and if they have some awareness, it tends to be superficial. The child may respond with, “I wanted to,” or “Because,” but more often, “I don’t know.”

On the basis of the superficial explanation, the parent seeks to dig deeper, believing the child is holding back the true motivation or is lying to cover up a more sinister truth. As the parent digs deeper, the child feels caught, unable to satisfy the demand for insight and disclosure. When the intensity escalates, the child blurts out a fragmented, incoherent string of excuses, hoping to appease the parent. Rather than realise their child is only responding in this manner hoping to satisfy an untenable inquisition, the parent is apt to believe the child is lying more wholeheartedly. Next the parent is either concerned for understanding the child’s necessity to lie so wholeheartedly or is fuming that lying now compounds the initial misdeed. Pity the child caught in this conundrum. The parent seeks an understanding to a problem of their own making while seeking to ascribe responsibility to the child.

Parents who seek to only understand their kids have two problems when it comes to managing their children’s behaviour. The first is they expect insight beyond their child’s ability. Children simply do not possess the cognitive ability to fully reflect on their motivation and articulate it to their parents. Further, they believe understanding and discussion will nurture the development of self-control and help internalize rules. What parents themselves must understand is that while the child may be able to reiterate the content of the

discussion and make promises of amends, from the child’s point of view, in the absence of a consequence deterring the misdeed, he or she still got away with it. Hence the child will understand the expectation, but still engage in the misdeed because there is no real or meaningful consequence apart from some special time with the parents, which in and of itself may be motivational of misbehaviour in the first place.

Parents must understand that a child’s motivation can be as simple as doing what they do, only because they can. Nothing deeper. As Freud says, “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.” In that way, kids are like most grown ups; We drive fast where we think we can; take an extra dessert when no one is looking; try to avoid a fine when returning an overdue item; and happily take advantage of a mis-priced item when making a purchase. The motivation? We think we can get away with it and so we try.

Kids operate on the same basic level. They do what they do if they think they can get away with it, like us.

In the course of normal childhood behaviour and misdeeds, while there is nothing necessarily wrong with helping a child to understand simple motivations and rules through discussion, don’t be mistaken that this alone will deter misdeeds. Further, seeking understanding alone may actually precipitate a cascade of more troublesome behaviour as shown above. To really manage your child’s behaviour, hold your child accountable to reasonable expectations and provide a consequence. The consequence may be as simple as your clearly voiced disapproval, a brief loss of privilege or time away from a preferred activity. Think of being caught for speeding. The officer may discuss with you the wrong of your offence, but will surely still give you the ticket. It’s a short discussion. Lesson learned, now on your way.

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