

# Ask Not, "Why?", But "What?"

By Arleta James, PCC

"Why did you eat all the cookies?" "Why did you take your sister's iPod?" "Why isn't your room clean yet?" "Why didn't you take the trash out?" "Why did you hit your brother?" This list could go on infinitely! The traumatized adoptee's behavior prompts "Why?" from his baffled parents—over and over!



In some instances, "Why?" is asked because the behavior is so bizarre! For example,

*John, now 15, (adopted at age 3) emptied the batteries from a flashlight. In their place, he put his own feces. He screwed the top back on the flashlight, and put it back in the drawer in the kitchen. Soon, the odor of poop began to permeate the kitchen. This was particularly difficult during dinner! Mom and Dad searched and searched for the source of the smell. Mom eventually realized that the stench was strongest in the drawer that contained the flashlight. She removed all the items from the drawer and eventually she came to the flashlight. When she took the top off, she was disgusted and angry! She wanted to know, "Why?"*

In other instances, the same behavior is repeated so many times, parents ask "Why?" in an effort to understand, "Why would a child do something that leads to unpleasant consequences—for the millionth time?"

Or, other parents think, "If I just know "Why?" I can "fix" the behavior.

Certainly, there are many explanations for "Why?"

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- For example, John feels like “crap” about himself. This self-perception comes from his early history of abandonment and abuse. A more detailed explanation is presented in our post, Stinky Business: Pee and Poop Issues in Adoptive Families – Part One and Part Two. Children, like John, who have experienced trauma often lack the verbal capacity to express their thoughts and feelings. *In essence, behavior is the language of the adopted son or daughter who experienced abandonment, abuse, institutionalization, etc.* If we “listen” to their behavior, we can figure out “Why?” these adoptees do many of the things they do. Children,

who steal, often feel stolen. Really, if women (i.e., social workers) came into your birth home and hastily moved you to a foster home with little explanation, or a couple—unknown to you—arrived at your orphanage, shortly boarded a plane with you and brought you to a new country, wouldn’t you feel stolen? Children who perpetually lose things feel lost. If you floated around the child welfare system—home to home—with little information about how you got there, or what is happening to your birth family, you might feel lost as well.

- Trauma interrupts development. Especially hard hit is the area of cause-and-effect thinking. This piece of development relies on consistent, nurturing care giving to move forward as it should in the first 18 months of life. Where was your child between birth and his or her first birthday? If there was deprivation, this is a likely culprit contributing to your child repeating the same mistakes—time and time again. A more thorough discussion of cause-and-effect thinking is presented in our post, Affection is Wonderful: Will the Behavior Ever Stop?
- Behavior lends to making parents and siblings angry! The adopted child feels emotionally safe with anger. The child that has been “dumped” many times feels that the adoptive family can’t love her. After all, she was too “bad” for her birth family to keep! Thus, the traumatized child thinks “If I don’t get to close, it won’t hurt so much when you dump me.” Fury, to this son or daughter, creates distance. This scenario inhibits attachment.

Overall, in the moment, your son or daughter isn’t likely to offer you any of the above explanations for his or her behavior. In fact, in response to the parental “Why?” the child or teen is more likely to offer a blank stare, an angry comment, or a lie! Now, more infuriated, the parent pursues the matter further. A lengthy battle ensues! The home environment is in turmoil!



Perhaps, re-training is a better solution. That is, learn to stop asking "Why?" Instead, ask, "What?" "What do I want to do about this behavior?": Is it a battle worth picking? Is there a consequence that can be carried out? Can the child generate his own solution?

*John's mother sat him down with a cookie and a glass of milk. She let him know—calmly and succinctly—that his behavior had created a health hazard and an inconvenience to his family members. She asked him, "How do you think it best to make this up to the family?" After some hemming and hawing, John decided he would clean the kitchen with disinfectant and make a formal apology to the family." Satisfied, John's Mom concluded with, "I do hope you figure out that you're not crap." John learned problem-solving and he was given a key piece of thinking to help him heal. Attachment was built, rather than torn down.*

If John didn't want to sanitize the kitchen, Mom and Dad had many other options. John could use money from his savings account to pay Mom or a sibling to carry out the needed cleaning. John could sell some electronic equipment or games at the nearest Game Stop in order to provide payment. Or, John could forego new clothing or more expensive menu selections when dining out until Mom and Dad felt the debt was satisfied. All of these solutions offer the opportunity for cause-and-effect to develop. Keep in mind, such natural and logical consequences will have to happen **often and over a long period of time** before your adopted son or daughter "gets it." It takes time to re-build development that was derailed by trauma!

In conclusion, "Why?" was answered in this post. "Why?" is deeply rooted in irrational cognitions and delayed development. So, give "What?" a try today! "What?" you have to lose is anger and conflict! "What?" you have to gain is healing and a more peaceful home environment!