

Buy the Why

By Dr Justin Coulson

“But why?”

“I’ll explain in a moment.”

“But why?”

“Why” might be one of the most aggravating questions our children can ask. It would be so much easier if our kids would just accept that we are older, wiser, more experienced, and are only asking them to do *that thing* because it’s worth doing. We just want them to trust us. And do the thing!

But no. They want to know “why”. Sometimes our “why” isn’t enough. They ask it again. “Why?” And again. “Oh... but why?”

Yet the question of “why” is an enormously important question. And it has powerful effects on our children’s willingness and desire to act.

A negative example

“Dad, what is a surd?” My daughter was in Year 9. Seated at the table doing her homework, she looked at me inquisitively.

“Are you trying to tell me a bad toilet joke?” I stalled - because I had no idea what a surd was.

She explained, “today I’ve asked two teachers - both adults with university degrees - whether they knew what a surd was. And they didn’t know!” She then pointed out I had a PhD, and I didn’t know. Her blunt conclusion: “If no adult except my maths teacher knows what a surd is, why am I learning surds? It seems like you can function pretty well in life without it?”

A positive example

Some years ago I was in the office of the Alannah and Madeline Foundation, an organisation doing excellent work in bullying prevention and online safety. There was a sign on an internal door that read, “Please close the door as it helps with the air-conditioning.”

I spoke to Annie, behind the reception desk; “I noticed the sign on the door. It has an explanation for your request. Why?”

Annie described how people consistently left the door open meaning the air-conditioning was inefficient. She tried a sign saying “Please shut the door”, but no one did. Then she added the “why”. Annie laughed as she told me “It’s amazing! Everyone shuts the door now.”

The Science

Studies have shown that when our children have a “why” that they can buy - they understand the rationale behind our requests and accept it as fair and reasonable - they are significantly more likely to do what we’re asking. But when they don’t “buy the why” - when there is no rationale behind our requests - they push back, offer minimal effort, or outright refuse.

A [2008 study](#) showed that when 136 students were given a rationale for an *uninteresting* learning task, they showed significantly greater motivation, deeper engagement, and better conceptual learning than those given no rationale. They personally valued the task because it “made sense” to them. The rationale (the “why”) transformed a task into something personally meaningful.

A major [analysis](#) of 74 studies showed that providing a rationale was the only strategy that produced increases in motivation to follow prescribed “health behaviours”. Not punishments. Not rewards. Not structure. Not pressure. The “why”.

So what does this mean for us as parents?

It means “because I said so” is one of the most expensive phrases in our vocabulary. It might win the moment, but it costs us our children's buy-in - and over time, their trust.

When we give our kids a genuine rationale - one that connects the request to something that actually matters to them - we aren't being soft. We aren't negotiating our authority away. We are doing something far more powerful: we are helping them want to cooperate, rather than simply forcing them to comply.

This doesn't mean every request needs a lengthy explanation. A simple, honest “why” is usually enough.

“We leave screens off in the morning because you're sharper at school when your brain hasn't been stimulated before 8am.” Or “We leave screens off in the morning because every time the screen goes on, we’re late. Work stops.”

That's it. Real. Brief. Meaningful.

Whether it's screens, music practice, visiting relatives on the weekend, cleaning the bedroom, picking up wet towels, putting food away, turning off lights, replacing toilet paper when the roll is empty, or any of the other things that drive us crazy at home, a rationale - a “why” - might just be the magic you're looking for.

Children who understand the “why” don't just follow rules. They internalise them. They carry them - because it now makes sense. When they “buy the why”, you no longer have to convince them. They understand, agree, and comply. And eventually, they don't need us to remind them at all — because the rule has become their own.



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