



When I Know There's a Reason

Starting with understanding can feel like a disappointing detour when your goal is to immediately start helping your child. You may feel the desire to access more practical skills - that actions are most important while changes in thought can come later.

But creating long-term, sustainable change begins with this vitally important component: Helping with Understanding. Shifting the way you think about your child's substance use can actually shift the way you interact with every other part of the change process. When you understand where your child's behavior is coming from, you can better understand how to help them.

What's more, changing your understanding means gaining a better understanding of yourself: your reactions, feelings, and thoughts. This type of insight can help you stay true to your values throughout the process of supporting your child.

Behaviors Make Sense

In order to effectively deal with any problem, you must first understand where it comes from, what contributes to it occurring, and how it is affecting both you and your loved one.

Imagine this scenario: you are walking on the side of a busy 2-way street. You see a man trying to cross the busy road. Horns are honking, you hear the loud swoosh of cars and trucks passing by. The man trying to cross the road seems impatient, upset, and frantic and does not seem to be considering the danger ahead of him. Instead, all he seems to be concerned about is getting to the other side of the street. What are your thoughts and feelings about the man and his behavior? (Pause and type your answers in the chat window.) What are some actions that those thoughts and feelings would make you want to take? (Pause and type your answers in the chat window.)

You may be thinking, "What's wrong with him? Why is he trying to cross traffic without thinking? Is he dangerous? You may be feeling scared for what's about to happen, anxious for the person you're watching, and confused by his behavior. Some actions you may want to consider including leaving or moving away from the situation so you don't have to see the person get hurt, or engaging in the situation by yelling at him in an attempt to secure a positive outcome.

Continue imagining the same scenario, only now, you have a little bit more information. Before you saw this man, he had been driving down the road with his dog in the backseat. At a stoplight, the dog jumped out of the car and began running through traffic. The man is now frantically running after his dog and trying to get his dog back before he gets hurt. Now take a moment to consider the following: What are your thoughts and feelings about this person after learning why he was frantically trying to cross such a busy street? (Pause and type your

answers in the chat window.) What are some actions those thoughts and feelings make you want to take? (Pause and type your answers in the chat window.)

An important takeaway from these scenarios is that behaviors make sense. Even when someone's actions seem completely unreasonable (or even destructive), their behaviors are still motivated by a set of values that you can likely understand.

To put it in context: your child is not using substances because they're "crazy" or because they want to anger you (though it may feel that way sometimes). People use substances because it provides something important to them, like relief from pain, the ability to sleep, or simply a feeling of calmness when they may have few other reliable sources of peace.

Even when the negative consequences of their use start to pile up, the fact remains that your child is likely getting something deeply positive from substances – and the presence of these negative consequences doesn't make the positives go away. It simply means they both exist together.

Why does this matter? Because once you understand what the positives of use are for your child, you can help them to find alternatives. For example, if they smoke to take away boredom, you might offer to spend more time with them doing something you both enjoy. If they drink to alleviate stress, maybe they might benefit from an engaging form of exercise instead. Try and brainstorm what some of these alternatives might be, by yourself or together.

Additionally, understanding their motivations can help you better frame your own feelings of frustration, fear, or sadness. While these reactions are natural ones to have, they likely stem more from your worry about the unpredictability of your child's behaviors than the reality of their motivation.

As an example, think about a person running into a busy road. Before you knew their motivations, their actions would be scary and upsetting in part because the person seemed unaware of the danger they were in. But if you learned their motivations, you could better contextualize the situation: why they were in the road, why the danger was worth it for them, and how you might be able to help.

Realizing that their behaviors make sense can allow for the hope that you will be able to move towards change together.

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