

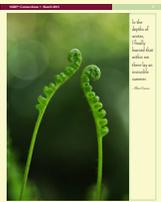
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Why and when to ask "Why?"

By Michele Mattoon, NSRF Director



Recently, I was facilitating a CFG coaches training in Bloomington, IN, NSRF's homebase. We were in the process of learning about probing questions and had just finished reading the [Understanding Probing Questions](#)  text. One of the participants (let's call her "Ann") commented that she had learned to be careful with "why?" questions. She had been told that they can sound accusatory and make people feel defensive. (In that article, we urge participants to make sure they're an advocate for the presenter with their language and inflection, rather than appearing to criticize especially when asking "why" questions.) "Ann" had been told that, instead of asking "why," to use words like, "How did you decide..." or "What are your feelings around..."

After a quick discussion about the necessity for being cautious when using "why," the group went into the [Probing Questions Practice Activity](#).  As an example within this activity, I shared a dilemma from when I was a young teacher with a student who had behavioral problems. My focusing question centered on just one aspect of her difficulties: "How do I help my student develop the social skills she needs to make and keep friends?"

After the group practiced creating and refining their probing questions for me, I decided to share with them one of the most powerful probing questions I received when I presented this dilemma to

my CFG community so many years ago. I told them that when my colleague asked me the probing question I was about to reveal, it felt like he reached out and punched me in the gut. My reaction was immediate, strong, and emotional, consisting of hurt, anger, and defensiveness. That question was, "Why do you think that that's your job?"

In this particular training, after the group reflected about my revelation for a few moments, "Ann" pointed out that my intensely negative reaction was caused by a "why" question. This was clearly true and a few other people in the group chimed in to say that "why" questions would definitely make them feel spotlighted and judged. After some discussion, I asked the group to listen to the rest of my story.

When I heard this question from my critical friend, my immediate thoughts were something like, "What do you mean, 'why do I think it's my job?' Of course it's my job! I'm here to help that child in anyway I can and social/emotional learning (especially for first graders) is just as important as academics! Students need teachers that care for them!" and on and on in that vein. You get the picture. After a time, I managed to calm down a bit. (Good thing there is a rule against trying to



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answer probing questions!) The more I reflected, the more I realized that under my anger and defensiveness and my sadness for this little girl, I really was not being the best teacher to her I could be. Why not? I realized that a part of me was trying to fill the role of her absent mother.

When that truth hit me, it dramatically changed my perspective of all the dilemmas I had around this student. In truth, the suggestions that my group gave me back then may or may not have helped me. But the radical change of perspective brought to me by that “why” question absolutely did. Because of that single probing question I was much more able to think clearly about what was best for that student, the other students in my class, and myself as their teacher. Although the protocol did not give me a magic wand to make all this student’s struggles disappear, I was able to let go of a lot of the anxiety and stress that this student’s history and behavior created for me. The clarity that this “why?” question brought me allowed me to make better choices around how I reacted and tried to help my student.

Why do you think that’s your job?

After I had finished my story, another of the participants (who had actually been a CFG coach for many years and was taking the training again as a “refresher”) also shared a “why” story. He was once asked several “why” questions in a row when he brought a dilemma to his CFG community. He also had an uncomfortable initial reaction, but similar to my experience, he truly had an epiphany around his dilemma because of the multiple “why?” questioning.

“Ann” now wondered if the “why” was one of the first or last questions I was asked. “In my case,” I said, “it was one of the last questions I was asked.” This training group then discussed how a “why” question early in a round of probing questions might be too powerful or too provocative, and might best be shared late in the round. I also pointed out that I shared my dilemma in my CFG community—one that had already built the needed foundation

of safety and trust.

This discussion highlighted the cautions that should be taken when using a powerful probing question such as “why?” Using “why” unskillfully can quickly shut down learning by creating defensiveness and irritation or anger. However, when used correctly, “why” can be a powerful tool to surface one’s beliefs and values. To make use of “why” in the most productive manner possible, use it:

- » As an advocate for the presenter—be intentionally curious and open, and avoid using a tone, inflection and/or body language that is judging,
- » In a group that already has built a culture of safety and trust, and
- » At the end of a probing question session, rather than the beginning.

Without these proper conditions in place, you would probably be wise to stick with “what” or “how” questions instead. For other examples of probing questions, please review the [Probing Questions Cheat Sheet](#) or [Probing Questions Approaches](#).



Big news!

Coaches Handbook coming soon

In addition to prepping this month’s edition of *Connections*, we’ve been working like mad preparing the new *Coaches Handbook*, which will be used in all the new coaches trainings this summer and which will be available for purchase on our website in the autumn. This new book, because it includes the protocols and materials that are only available on our website for trained coaches, will ONLY be available for NSRF-certified coaches and NSRF National Facilitators to purchase.

Brand-new content includes not only updated and new protocols and activities, some never-before seen on our website, but also an entire section dedicated to tools for coaches, including:

- › Tips and pointers around how to form CFG communities, the facilitation of protocols, and more
- › Helpful information about how to structure and run your CFG community

- › Activities to hone your CFG coaching skills including a cheat sheet for matching protocols to the work at hand
- › Information to share with colleagues and administrators to promote your new CFG communities
- › More tools and techniques for CFG coaches

Once the artwork for the handbook goes to the printer, we’ll also begin adding the new materials to our website, available to our coach members. Watch for an announcement about new materials on the website in the next issue of *Connections* ... or just keep an eye on the website for new content!

