

# BUT WHY

How to Answer Tricky Questions from Kids  
and Have an Honest Conversation with Yourself

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Foreword by Anna Mathur



## FOREWORD

As a psychotherapist, I welcome questions from my clients, but when they come from my kids, I am filled with fear of ‘getting it wrong’. *But Why?* places sturdy hands upon my shoulders. It has cultivated a bravery within myself to face the questions that I often feel a rising temptation to sidestep.

A few months ago, absent-mindedly scrolling on my phone in the passenger seat of the car, my ears suddenly tuned into something my husband said to our son in the back. I wasn’t sure of the context as I hadn’t been listening, but I heard: ‘You do know that Mummy and Daddy made you?’

My head whipped round to face him, wide-eyed and startled. I held my breath waiting for the questions to come. ‘But why? But how?’

I diverted attention by whipping out a scratched CD from under the seat, and the questions didn’t arrive. I breathed a sigh of relief.

It made me think, though; we need to be prepared for the questions to come. And even if I don’t have a solid answer up my cheese-sandwich-crumbed sleeve, I need to expect them and to be open to them instead of shrugging them off or distracting their course elsewhere to somewhere more comfortable.

I aim to not be fearful of the questions, at least. I am my kids’ navigator during these years. They turn to me for safety, to have their needs met, and importantly to help them make sense of the world around them.

And sometimes, guiding them to making sense of the world around them will include acknowledging the uncertainty, the unknowns, the lack of right or wrongs, the grey areas. Plus

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the fact that they are free to form an opinion that may differ from mine.

Whatever they look to me for, I want to welcome their enquiry, rather than scramble to flee from it. As they see us head to vote with ballot cards in our hands, as they are introduced to Leo's two mums. As they meet a child in the playground who doesn't move in the same way as they do.

As a psychotherapist, I have spent thousands of hours welcoming the questions of clients as they explore and form their own world view. For how we see the world is both changed by what we already know, and changed by our new insights too. I have seen lives transformed by the questions asked to me by clients, sat upon my blue sofa, but also the questions they have asked themselves.

So why, then, do I find it so challenging to hold the space as my kids seek my support to guide them, to dig through what we know and what we don't? To sit with uncertainty, to feel angered at new realisations about the planet, to feel hurt at rejection, and to push and question the boundaries drawn around them by me, by society.

I think it's because I have a deep fear of 'getting it wrong', which I am consistently trying to overcome. 'Presence over perfection' is my new mantra, and what greater way to challenge myself in this, in my motherhood, than to desire to be present with their questioning, no matter how big or small, and regardless of how much I know, or don't.

I am not all-knowing; I am not perfect. I am a few years down the road in age from them, with a little more experience under my belt, of course, but they don't need me to regurgitate cold, hard facts like a human Wikipedia with a ponytail; they do not need me to give a crisp and confident answer. They do not need perfect; they need present. They need me to sit with them and grapple with the hard questions, to muse on them and put

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my hands up when quite frankly, I don't know. But they also need me to have asked myself some of these questions so that I can share what I do know, as well as what I don't.

I have always admired Clemmie's courage to 'go there'. To ask herself the questions, to facilitate and welcome conversation around the sticky topics and, most powerfully, not to shy away from challenge or taboo. The very nature of taboo and sidestepping very valid questioning (especially from a child as they seek to navigate and make sense of the world) tells us that we should feel shame about the not-knowing. Taboo is silencing; it halts enquiry and creates 'no-go zones'. We learn to toe the line, stick to the common paths and can end up denying our own thoughts and opinions.

Having spent years unpicking my own learned need to fall in line, to nod along, to swerve, I want more for my kids than this. I want them to find value in the questioning, in the way the world opens up when you challenge prejudice and structures. For the way the brain's synapses fizz and reform when we become pliable to having our opinions grown by welcoming the differing experiences and stories of others. Life becomes richer when we welcome enquiry and difference, and are willing to challenge and be challenged.

*But Why?* invites it all. It's an aid for parents to help them welcome explorations around the big questions, the small questions and all the feelings that come with them. It's a comforting and supportive 'let's do this', a hand on your shoulder as your hand searches wildly for a scratched CD to distract. It's a toolbox, a buffet of food for thought so you can have those conversations over dinner tables with friends should you want them, before you are blindsided on a Tuesday morning as you pack crisps into schoolbags.

But most of all, *But Why?* is the breaking down of the taboo. The tearing away of the 'keep out' tape cordoning certain

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conversations. Encouraging enquiry and openness, a loving learning rather than a shutting down. A better imperfect and subjective as opposed to the churning out of an A\* answer. Because really, it's all about presence over perfection, connection over correction.

Thank you, Clemmie. This book is going to support me in giving to my children what I have so confidently been giving my clients. Adventure lies outside of our comfort zones, so for them, and for me, I must continue to step out of mine.

Anna Mathur

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# INTRODUCTION

Cut a long story short, I don't have the answers. None of them.

At which point you're probably wondering why you bothered picking up the book. Which is in itself a good question. Maybe you were looking for spiritual or moral guidance in the form of 'answering big questions'.

Sorry to disappoint. I will level with you. Let's get it all out on the table, then we all know where we are at and I don't have to pretend, which would be hard to maintain for the following 70,000 words.

First of all, why did I set out on this 'journey' (a horribly over-used word, but there doesn't seem to be a better one)? Before I had kids, I was naïve. I thought I knew how life-changing parenting was going to be. I didn't. I thought I had lived a fair bit before having kids. I hadn't. I was thirty when I had Bertie and we had done a lot of the normal stuff – but boy, was I un-lived and unprepared!

I could easily imagine, pre-kids, that Ben, my husband, would be good at the fun elements of parenting: the den-building, superhero, sporty bits. Whereas I *fully* backed myself to be excellent at the parts that involved 'answering big questions'. Perhaps because I considered myself to be worldly and informed and (before my brain got ruined by babies) I loved throwing around ideas and philosophising about the whys

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and wherefores of existence. I'd even done a very intellectual (cough cough) degree in Drama, Culture and Media Studies to prove it. So naturally I couldn't wait to help nurture the precious minds of those (at that point imaginary) kids I would create.

I was wrong.

As is the case with everything in parenting (and, frankly, in life), the reality is nothing like you imagine.

It's Tuesday night. But it feels like at least Thursday. I have houmous on my top. I have a million emails to answer and, while I have bathed three kids, I still have to negotiate bedtime with two of them. My period's due. And I'm hungry.

And then a sweet, innocent and curious voice pipes up from the sofa: 'But why do dead people just sleep?'

*Really? I think. Are we doing this now?*

Not only do I want to hop-skip away from ONE OF LIFE'S TRICKY QUESTIONS towards the tantalisingly close scenario of my children being in bed and me sitting down to eat my favourite quiche, I also don't have a clue what to say.

Could this be the moment when my well-meaning but ultimately slapdash answer screws over my (occasionally) darling children and results in them ending up in therapy for years on end? And if so, how on earth do I avoid this outcome?

As well as being less-than-adept at answering the 'but why?' questions from my kids, the other thing I got wrong is the whole premise of this book.

The plan behind it was a simple one: pick the biggest, most common, most thorny issues. Set aside several months of research and really get to the bottom of them and come back with some solid answers.

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This did not happen.

The more I learned, the further I dug, the less knowledgeable I became. If it were possible to be minus knowledgeable, that is where I am at. In addition, this research period perfectly coincided with us being hit by a global pandemic. I began writing in early April 2020 – what a great project to undertake during lockdown, right?

Wrong! (Are you sensing a theme here?)

There are many things to learn from Covid-19, but one of them is that spending months at home, surrounded by kids, no longer able to hug friends and family and with no certain plan of what in store is a sure way to find yourself questioning everything you thought you knew.

Cue existential crisis.

And that's not even an exaggeration – there was a particularly low moment involving a whiteboard, a multi-pack of pens and me trying to 'crack' the concept of 'why we don't feel happy all the time' on too many coffees and not enough sleep. Yes, I was literally crying over the concept of joy!

I digress.

The more I learned, the less I knew. And the more glaringly obvious it was that googling the answers could not and should not cut it.

Instead I looked to the Stoics, who seem to know a thing or two about life. They helped me back on track by reminding me that it is okay not to know. Maybe that means I am on the right track to enlightenment. 'It is impossible to begin to learn that which one thinks one already knows,' said Epictetus. Which is a good thing to remember in order to fight that knee-jerk reaction. However, just because you don't know, doesn't mean you can opt out. This is a 'brush it under the



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table' approach that might have been common in previous generations – but we can do better.

I also sought solace in other people's anxiety: by asking how other parents felt about answering their kids' tricky questions. I quickly realised that it's not just me feeling daunted. Is that a good or bad thing? Not sure, but 87 per cent of those I surveyed in my research (see below) worried that they weren't getting the answers right.

Many people were delighted by their children's curiosity but concerned by about their own lack of knowledge, a difficulty finding the right language and both a fear of potentially getting it wrong and also being judged by others for getting it wrong.

Many were debilitated by the pressure that what they might say could be offensive to someone else, or, fearing their own unconscious bias, that projecting their beliefs onto their children could prevent them from creating their own. Yup. Yup. Yup. Also, many said kids have a knack of catching you by surprise, and asking you difficult questions at the wrong moment.

And then there is the tightrope that needs to be trodden between wanting to avoid hiding things from them but not wanting to overwhelm them either; the battle between trying to solve their issues for them and wanting them to have the tools to find solutions themselves. So we are all worried about the 'but whys?' Now what are we going to do about it?

Panic!

Then be rational (and momentarily serious). Much of this book is informed by the hours and hours of conversations I've been lucky enough to have on my podcast *Honestly*, but also the 300-plus contributors who have written for my blog Mother of All Lists, bravely sharing a first-hand account of an experience.

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Not to mention the huge network of people willing to open up on Instagram, often in ways that leave me humbled and amazed. In fact, periodically you'll see me refer to my own 'research' – to be clear, that is me using Instagram Stories to 'ask the audience'. Votes and submissions come direct to me, rather than being public, which I believe makes people very truthful in their responses (by truthful, I mean 'absolutely unfiltered'). I asked about different subjects at different times, therefore the pool of responses varied but broadly ranged from 2,000 to 5,000 in number.

Between all these channels I've been in a unique position of having had access to a vast array of insights to draw on when looking for the answers to any questions. Plus I have supplemented all this with a mountain of supporting study and my own experience as a mother of three.

That's my bit, but I also have an idea of how I hope *you* will approach this. Remember in maths we were always told to show our workings? That's how I'd like you to see this book.

Or think of it like cooking. I rarely follow a single recipe when cooking. Instead I read through a few different ideas by various cooks and take the bits of them I like, bearing in mind a) what I have in the fridge and b) what I fancy, and one way or another I end up with a version that works. And then next time I might try something a bit different.

In here you'll find a smorgasbord of pointers and perspectives to add to your experiences. Nothing is prescriptive or definitive; they're just there for you to pick from when and if you fancy.

Between the answers to all those 'but why?' questions, you'll find what I am unscientifically calling 'joining bits'. They are the tools and techniques that I have found help me to answer tricky questions. You might consider them 'guiding principles

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for self-discovery’ – but that sounds horrendous, so let’s stick with ‘joining bits’.

When setting about answering tricky questions it’s vital to check two things: 1) your sources, and 2) your assumptions. Assumptions can be dangerous. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) was fundamental in helping me learn to help myself by enabling me to recognise my own thought patterns and giving me the tools to rationalise them. Because thoughts are not facts.

I hope there will be a similar process at play for you here. No knee-jerk answers. Instead this is an invitation to stop and think. In her book, *Purpose*<sup>1</sup>, Jessica Huie calls out the fact that we all start out as blank canvases but soon our parents unconsciously begin to mould us. Their fears, opinions and version of truth become ours. This is why it sometimes feels like perspectives aren’t moving at all. That out-of-date comment from your mate about a gay person is shocking, but often it’s not their voice you’re really hearing; it’s a lingering generational hangover.

Huie uses the analogy of a car; by the time we reach adulthood, the boot is so full of baggage that our vehicles can hardly power up. We can all well imagine that Tetris-style image in which no family trip happens without squeezing stuff into every available space in the back of the car.

Our job as adults is to sort through all that stuff and ask ourselves if we really need or want to keep carrying it with us. It’s easier said than done to unburden ourselves and challenge our own perspectives in the name of growth. Which is why many choose to ignore it and instead slam the boot shut and keep going.

But, as Philippa Perry taught us in *The Book You Wish Your Parents Had Read*<sup>2</sup> – whether we like it or not, we are going

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to shape our kids. I would suggest that it's better that we do that when we aren't burdened with a load of bags that we might not even need.

The other concept I have been drawn to while writing this book is the idea that you should aim to give your child what is known as 'emotional privilege' and how it is the nectar of love. It comes in a few guises, including shielding our children from our own anxieties and being able to enter into their imaginative world. It also extends to being honest with them.

I believe there are huge benefits to our children knowing that we don't always have the answers. It's not 'I don't know and that's a worry' because we want them to feel stable and secure. We want them to hear, 'I don't know and I am going to find out.' Rather than aiming to 'know it all', we must be forever learning.

My granny was already nearly blind when she got her first computer. She wasn't embarrassed about the fact that her emails were riddled with mistakes when her original meaning was mangled by the voice-recognition technology. No way, José. She was wise enough to know the odd mistake was a small price to pay for the benefit of the sense of connection that email brought her.

But what my granny and her generation didn't do was google the answers, or resort to someone they followed on the internet (oh the irony).

So we need to be willing to get it wrong or admit when we've reached the limit of our knowledge, but at the same time we do need to try to find *some* kind of sensible response when our child lobs us yet another curveball. But how do we do that, when faced with an impossible question at an impossible moment?

My main piece of advice when answering any question is to *buy yourself time*. I will tell you why. First, in many instances

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the questions are nothing more than a ruse aimed at trying to deflect or delay you from the task in hand. Common scenarios include (but are not limited to) bedtime, putting on shoes and eating a healthy meal you lovingly prepared.

Second, you rarely give your best answers when reactive rather than contemplative. Or when you are tired/stressed/hungry/unprepared. But buying time doesn't mean you shouldn't come back to the question later.

Oh, and the questions themselves? The ones you will find in this book have come from all over: many from my kids, many from conversations I've had with parents and guardians both online and in real life. Not to mention my WhatsApp group with my best uni mates: once upon a time we used to tear up the streets of Bristol partying – now we limp through the struggles of being parents while trying not to kill our partners and hoping to keep a sense of ourselves.

One person messaged to say their young kid had pulled her aside to enquire, 'What is a gang bang?' Yup, I may have sniggered A LOT reading that. And in this instance I am going to leave you to answer that one yourselves. Soz.

The questions I have included in the chapters that follow are a starting point to covering the big stuff. Not definitively or conclusively. I split them into broad subsections – but as you will see they all end up relating to one another because really you can't talk about death without love, or money without gender. I don't quite go as far as answering, 'What is the meaning of life?' but 70,000 words in, it felt as if I had.

And even then, maybe the meaning of life is attempting to prepare the next generation for experiences outside of our own. Or at least learning when a question comes from a curious mind and when it's just a delay tactic to avoid bedtime.

Speaking of bedtime, remember the days when you were young and could stay up until the sun rose, talking to some-

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one and putting the world to rights? I used to love hearing all their stuff, trying to absorb it and using it as a lens to understand my stuff.

These days I am fairly passionate about being in bed by 10.30 p.m. But although the sunrise session with a pack Marlboro Lights is behind me, I still thrive on collecting anecdotes as well as all the bigger insights, so while I was writing this book I have asked all sorts of people to complete the sentence: ‘When I was young, I wish I had known that . . .’

You’ll find their answers dotted between sections. Like little bonuses. A pound down the back of a sofa, or an ancient but still edible kid’s snack lurking at the bottom of your bag when you have forgotten to have breakfast and find yourself hangry. Okay, I lied, I have never missed breakfast. But I do like finding forgotten snacks. And I do like these snacky insights from excellent people.

Okay. Another preamble. Let’s do this . . .

**When I was a kid, I wish I had known that . . .**  
there are other ways to learn, that everyone takes in and retains information differently, emotional intelligence is just as valid and needed to be successful as IQ. Find the way you like to learn and build your education around this. I love the quote attributed to Einstein: ‘Everyone is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.’

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