

What Might Be Going On Here?

Looking beyond the behaviour

We make sense of behaviour quickly.

“He’s being difficult.” “She’s avoiding the work.” “He wants attention.” “She’s trying to control everything.”

Sometimes our first reading is right. Sometimes it isn’t.

This resource is a way to slow that moment down. It does not ask you to excuse behaviour or find a hidden diagnosis for it. It simply helps you separate what you actually know from what you think might be happening.

That can change what you try next.

1. What did I actually see or hear?

Describe what happened without explaining why.

- Instead of: She was being defiant about homework.
- Try: She sat at the table but did not open the book. When I reminded her, she said, “I’m not doing it,” and left the room.

What happened?

2. What did I assume it meant?

This is not about judging yourself. Adults have to interpret behaviour all day.

- He is being rude.
- She wants to get out of doing it.
- He is overreacting.
- She is trying to control the situation.
- He knows how to do this.
- She just needs to try.

What was your first interpretation?

3. What else could be going on?

You are not trying to find the “correct” explanation yet.

- Not understand what is expected
- Not know how to begin
- Be worried about getting it wrong
- Expect the task or situation to be difficult
- Need more information about what is going to happen

- Be tired, hungry or physically uncomfortable
- Already be overloaded
- Be struggling with something that happened earlier
- Be worried about another person or social situation
- Be trying to avoid embarrassment or failure
- Need more time to process what has been asked
- Genuinely dislike or disagree with what is being asked
- Know something about the situation that you do not

What are two or three possibilities worth considering?

4. What could I try?

You do not need to solve everything. Choose one response that might give you more information or make the next step more manageable.

- Clarify what is expected
- Reduce the task to the first step
- Ask what part feels difficult
- Give the child time to process
- Reduce unnecessary noise, questions or demands
- Provide information about what will happen next
- Acknowledge the worry without promising that everything will be fine
- Offer a manageable way to approach rather than avoid the situation
- Check whether something happened that you do not know about

What will I try?

5. What happened?

Did the child become more able to engage? Did nothing change? Did you learn something new? Did your original interpretation still seem likely? Did another explanation make more sense?

What happened?

A response that does not work is still information. You are learning about this child, not trying to complete the worksheet correctly.

What this can look like in real life

“She refuses to get out of the car.”

What I saw	We arrived at school. She stayed in the car, would not undo her seatbelt and became angry when I
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	told her we needed to go in.
My first interpretation	She's refusing school again.
What else might be going on?	She may be worried about something happening that day. There may have been a problem with another child. She may be overwhelmed by the transition into school. She may be exhausted. She may simply be telling me very clearly that something at school is not okay.
One thing to try	Instead of beginning with getting her out of the car, ask: "Which bit of going in feels hardest today?"
What I learn	I may not get an answer immediately. But I've opened a different conversation and, if this keeps happening, I now have something more useful to investigate with her and the school.

"She has to control everything."

What I saw	She repeatedly asked who would be at the party, where we would park, whether I would stay and exactly what time we would leave.
My first interpretation	She is trying to control the whole plan.
What else might be going on?	She may be anxious about an unfamiliar social situation. Knowing what to expect may make it feel more manageable.
One thing to try	Give her the information we genuinely know, then help her plan for one or two things we cannot know in advance.
What I learn	Does having a clearer picture help her move forward, or does each answer immediately produce another question? That distinction tells us something.

"She doesn't care about school."

What I saw	She said the test was stupid, would not study and became angry when I brought it up.
My first interpretation	She doesn't care enough to make an effort.
What else might be going on?	She may be afraid of doing badly. She may not know how to study. The amount she needs to cover may feel impossible. Or she genuinely may not see the point of the test.
One thing to try	Instead of arguing about attitude, ask: "If we made this easier to start, what would you need?"

What I learn	The answer may tell me whether I am dealing with worry, task difficulty, overwhelm, disengagement or something I haven't considered.
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You don't need a hidden explanation for everything

Sometimes a child does not want to do something. Sometimes they are angry. Sometimes the boundary still needs to hold. Sometimes the answer really is no.

Looking beyond behaviour does not mean explaining every difficult moment away.

It means being careful about treating an interpretation as a fact.

When something keeps happening, when the reaction seems much bigger than the situation or when your usual response is getting you nowhere, try separating these two questions:

What do I know happened?

What do I think it means?

There is often useful information in the gap between them.