

Have you heard the story about the young husband who tried to learn the family secrets of cooking a ham? Shortly after the wedding, the young man's new bride proudly cooked a big ham. Before putting it in the baking dish, she sliced the ends off the ham. Her husband asked—with a genuine desire to understand—why she did that. She was slightly hurt that her hubby seemed to be questioning her culinary skills, and her hurt came out as irritation. She first gave him *the look*—the one that says, “Don't you know *anything*?”—and with a tinge of exasperation in her voice, she replied, “That's the way you cook a ham!” The husband scratched his head in bewilderment; he couldn't figure out the need to cut off two perfectly good pieces of ham, but what did he know?

A few months later, the young couple enjoyed a sumptuous Sunday dinner with the bride's family. When the mother-in-law was preparing to cook the ham, she also cut the ends off the ham before putting it in the baking pan, and once again—a little timidly this time—the young husband asked why. Like her daughter before her, she scoffed gently, came close to rolling her eyes, and said, “That's the way you cook a ham!” Again, he wondered about it, but figured his no-nonsense mother-in-law wouldn't do something if she didn't have a good reason for it. And he also decided not to press his luck if he wanted to maintain a harmonious relationship with his in-laws.

More time passed, and one day, the young couple attended a big family event at his wife's grandmother's home. Husbands, sons, aunts, uncles, wives, daughters, cousins—lots of folks of all ages—filled the kitchen, the den, and other rooms. The young husband happened to be nearby when the grandmother prepared to cook the ham and—you guessed it—she cut off the ends of the very large ham before placing it in her ancient-looking, slightly dented, metal baking pan. He wondered if he should risk questioning the matriarch of the family. But his wife's grandmother was a spritely, kind, and patient soul, so he took a chance. He edged closer to her, kept his voice close

Remember the Ham!

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow
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to a whisper (he wanted to make sure his 87-year-old grandmother-in-law could hear him, and hoped no one else would), and respectfully inquired, “Mee-Maw, I noticed you cut off the ends of the ham, and my wife did that, too,

and so did her mother. Why is it important to cut the ends off the ham?” With a look of surprise, a little giggle, and a gentle pat on his arm, she replied, “Well, honey, I don't know about my daughter and granddaughter, but as you can see, the pan isn't quite long enough—and it's the biggest pan I have—so if I didn't cut the ends off, it wouldn't fit, would it?” *Badda-bing, badda-boom.*

The young man was curious; he wanted to learn and understand. His wife and mother-in-law, however, were not so curious. They actually didn't need to cut the ends off *their* hams, and never—over many years—did they ask Mee-Maw why she did. They just assumed there must be a good reason for doing so, and they mindlessly followed suit.

How many times have we done things the way they've always been done, with no idea of the “why”? How many of us lack intellectual curiosity, are afraid to question others, and/or think others must know best, and so we simply “follow the leader”?

On the other hand, how many who *have been asked “why”* feel irritated or threatened by the question, and believe the person asking the question is rude, arrogant, or ignorant? How many respond, “That's just the way we do it!” How many, when questioned, stop in their tracks and say, “Gosh, I don't know—maybe we'd better find out.”

I first heard the HAM STORY many years ago (I can't even remember from whom or where I heard it) and it stuck with me. Having the image of a ham tucked into one corner of my brain has been a helpful reminder to ponder my own practices and habits, as well as those of others.

In the frequently nonsensical domain of Disability World, being intellectually curious, wanting to learn and understand, and trying to get to the bottom of “why things are done the way they are”

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goes beyond mere interest; it can be of paramount importance. Uncovering a false, irrational, erroneous, or antiquated justification of a particular practice in disability services, special education, etc., might lead to significant, positive change. It might also mean the difference between a life of exclusion, dependence, and hopelessness, or one of inclusion, interdependence, and confidence for a person with a disability. At the same time, and as an example, if a parent's curiosity—her “inquiring mind”—leads to the recognition that a service/program makes no sense for her child, she may decide to let her good judgment and common sense trump the recommendations of experts and say, “No!”

Do *you* know why *your* human service agency, disability organization, public school, or other entity does this or that? *Does anyone know?* The origins of some practices are so old they have hair on them and may have made sense at one time, but don't any longer; others are lost to obscurity; and some never made sense to begin with, but they're still operational.

Putting a young child with a disability who's not talking into a special, segregated class with other children who may also be delayed in speech *doesn't make any sense*. If we want a child to learn to talk, he needs to be surrounded by children who talk! Similarly, why do we congregate students with emotional/mental health diagnoses in the same classroom? Is it any wonder they learn *more* “inappropriate behaviors” from one another? Why do we do this? Why, in the 21st Century, do we follow the antiquated, institutional practice of congregating people based on their diagnoses, perhaps in the erroneous belief that they have the same needs. This practice has never been what's best or what makes sense for people on the *receiving end* of services—we know it results in negative outcomes for people with disabilities—but it has always seemed convenient or “good” for those who *provide* services!

**A prudent question is
one half of wisdom.**

Francis Bacon

Again, learning the “why” (and then making changes when the practice doesn't make any sense) can be crucially important. But as the young husband in the HAM STORY realized, *how* we attempt to learn is just as important. Simply blurting out, “Why,” may cause the other person to feel attacked, criticized, etc., which can result in communication breakdown, ruffled feathers, and worse! There are better strategies to use—like following the wisdom of Wendell Johnson, a great linguist, who wrote, “In the meaningful use of language it is a cardinal rule that the *terminology of the question determines the terminology of the answer.*”

Let's say a mother doesn't understand why teachers do such-and-such regarding her child's education.

Instead of asking, “why,” she could ask, “Is this a school policy?” Amazingly, some educators don't know if a practice is part of special ed law, an official school board policy, or simply the whim of a principal, special ed director, etc.

The mother could then ask, “May I please have a copy of that written policy?” There are many other ways to ask “why” without saying the word, and without igniting angry responses. Put your thinking cap on, get creative, and come up with more.

The process of sincerely asking respectful questions in order to *learn*—not to attack, argue, or be disagreeable—has the potential to create positive change. What if, in the example above, we learned that a particular practice was never a written policy, but was simply a procedure instituted 20 years ago, by an administrator who's now dead and buried, and the procedure seemed to make sense at the time for some students, and over time it became unofficial *policy* for all students. But no one ever cared to wonder about it until that courageous, inquisitive parent came along.

Remember the ham! Pump up your intellectual curiosity; wonder why; and ask sincere questions in a respectful manner. Your actions just might change a practice, a policy, the life of a person with a disability, or even the world. *Oink-oink!*