

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

Jane and Melody's Favorite 2022 Episodes

December 30, 2022

Jane 00:21

This is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids, from Vermont Public. I'm Jane Lindholm. On this show, we take questions from curious kids just like you, and we find answers. This episode is being released right at the end of 2022. So we thought it would be fun to look back at some of our favorite episodes of the year. So I'm joined by...

Melody 00:42

Me! Hi, everyone, it's Melody. And yeah, we figured you might not have caught all of our episodes this year. So this is a chance for us to give you a chance to hear some new things.

Jane 00:52

Let's just dive right in. We're going to share a little bit of four different episodes. So Melody, do you want to start?

Melody 00:57

Yeah, so one of my favorite episodes this year was one called "Why do we have friends?" And one of the things I liked about this episode was that we asked kids to answer the question, and we heard from dozens of you about how and why we have friends. And I love to hear all of your responses. And I love getting kids into episodes.

Marni 01:15

My name is Marni. I'm five years old. And I live in Austin, Texas. And this is how you make friends. We try to find somebody that we want to make friends. We say, "Hello, can I be your friend?"

Connor 01:31

My name is Connor, I'm seven years old. I live in London, Ontario, Canada. My my advice about friendship is to choose someone who likes to do the same thing as as you do.

Leilah 01:45

Hi, my name is Leilah. I'm from Atlanta, Georgia, and I'm nine years old. This is how I make friends. First I say hi. And then I say my name, then I ask them their name. Then I ask them to play. And then if they say yes, we start to play. After a while, I start to talk to them. And then we and then we just have fun. And that's how I make a friend.

Jane 02:16

I love that episode, too, Melody, I really liked hearing kids offer solutions for how to be a good friend, but also what to do when somebody is not being a good friend. Because we all go through different stages of friendship with different people. And so it's really helpful to have some strategies for thinking about ways to be a friend and ways to maybe deal with people who are not being good friends.

02:39

Yeah. And it's funny, I mean, kids think about friends as much as adults do. So this is actually a good episode for everybody in the family to listen to. And in addition to our kid experts, we also talked to Dr. Friendtastic. And she's also known as Eileen Kennedy Moore. And she's written a couple books about kids and friendships. And one of the things I liked about talking to her was she had a couple really direct strategies for making friends. And I think that's something that's often missing in the way that adults like me, and parents who are trying to help we don't often give kids the exact tools of what exactly to do when making friends. So here's a little bit more of that episode.

Ethan 03:13

Hello, my name is Ethan. I'm eight. My question is how to make friends?

Lila 03:23

Why are people usually friendly? And how do people know what to say when they're trying to make a friend?

Jane 03:33

That last question was from six year old Lila.

Eileen Kennedy Moore 03:36

There are several steps in that. The first thing is that we need to show openness to friendship. So we need to signal that, hey, I'm open to getting to know you and to maybe starting a friendship with you. We do this by smiling and saying hi. We do it by giving a compliment or doing a small act of kindness for someone. There are thousands of ways that we can signal that, "Hey, I'm interested in a friendship." Another thing that's important is to pick people who are likely to become friends with us. If you think about two overlapping circles, that overlap where one circle is you and the other circle is the other kid, that overlap in the center, that's your common ground. That's where friendships begin. If you really don't have much in common with another kid, you're probably not going to become friends with them. Another thing to keep in mind is that kids make friends by doing fun things together. So think about what you like to do that you could do with other people and go do it. Invite them. A lot of times kids are very scared of inviting somebody because they're like, oh, I don't know him that well. I can't have them over. That's backwards. Invite 'em over and then you will become closer. You don't have to wait until you're close and then invite them over. If you've had fun with a kid one time, great, you know 'em well enough to get together and maybe build the friendship.

Jane 05:08

You might consider asking the other person to do something with you, like, go play on the swings or something you think you'd both enjoy as sort of a start of a way to ease into friendship. You know, there's also a difference if you're asking one kid to play with you, or a group of kids to play with you.

And Dr. Friendtastic has some strategies to think about, when there's a group of kids that you're trying to get to know.

Eileen Kennedy Moore 05:36

We are more likely to be successful joining a single kid, or a group of four or more on the playground. Isn't that interesting? Yeah. So it's not that you can't join a group of two or three. But often those are more close knit and less open to somebody joining them if you don't know them well. A single kid is they want to play with somebody there. They're definitely open. And a group of four or more, well, it's kind of big, and there's plenty of room to join. Another thing that's really important for kids to know, is that there's a very specific set of steps for how to join a group of kids at play. I really liked the way you said, "Hey, do you want to play with me?" Because now you're inviting the person. A lot of times, grownups tell kids, go over to those kids and ask, "Can I play, too?" Bad idea, because think about what happens: the other kids have to stop what they're doing, turn around, look at you, decide if they want you to join, and you've just interrupted the play. So from a kid's perspective, that's kind of rude. What researchers tell us is, the way to join a group is two steps: you watch, then blend. So watch what the kids are doing and then slide into the action without interrupting. The way I explain this to kids is kind of like merging onto a highway,

Jane 07:06

which they haven't done yet. But they've probably been in the backseat for.

Eileen Kennedy Moore 07:08

But you've probably seen your parents do it, right. And there are two ways to mess this up. One is your parents could just sit there on the entrance ramp watching the cars go by, and you'd never get where you want to go. The other way is, and your parents would never do this, they could just barge in without even looking and there would be a big crash. So that's not a good idea, either. Just like your parents, or your grown ups, watch them blend when they get onto the highway, you want to do the same thing. So figure out what the kids are doing. And then you might do the same thing near them. You might like if they're building something, you might do something helpful, like bring over extra sticks. You might open with a compliment. Or if they're playing a game, watch and figure out which is the losing team because they're more likely to be open to having you join.

Jane 07:58

What do you do if you're shy, if that feels so hard just to even go talk to somebody, let alone suddenly be in their play?

Eileen Kennedy Moore 08:08

Sometimes it helps to just watch other kids doing this. And then you can realize, huh, that is what happens. People who are shy tend to focus on how uncomfortable they feel. But what they don't realize is the message they're sending to other people is, "I don't like you and I don't want anything to do with you." Think about it; if somebody says "Hi," and you'd like look away and don't say anything, the other person is going to say, "Oh, I guess they don't like me." That's not what you're feeling, but that's what you're communicating. Learning how to say hi is a really important skill. And there are several steps with that. So you look the person in the eye. Or if that's uncomfortable for you, you can look them in the

forehead right between the eyebrows. From a little bit of a distance that looks the same. Then you smile to show that you're happy to see that person. You say hi. And you say the person's name because that makes the greeting personal. Not just Hi, whoever you are, I don't care. It's like no, Hi, it's nice to see YOU.

09:12

So that was one of my favorite episodes. Find in your podcast feed. It's called "Why do we have friends?" Okay, Jane, what's an episode that you really liked this year?

Jane 09:20

I really liked all of them. So let's just play them all.

Melody 09:23

Oh, okay. Everybody got a couple hours?

Jane 09:26

But I will pick one. I really enjoyed our episode with a researcher named Chris McManus and it was all about why most people are right-handed and a select few people are left-handed. Do you remember that, Melody?

09:38

I do remember that. And I also remember that Jane, like a lot of left-handed people loves to talk about how she's left-handed, so I'm actually surprised we've made it this far into our podcast without actually doing a left-handed episode yet, but we finally agreed and we finally found the right person.

Jane 09:52

It's important, Melody! I mean, you know tools are made for righties; it's sometimes it's hard to do things like use a fancy butter or cake knife because it's not made for a lefty. Or like if you're learning to play the guitar and your teacher's a right-handed teacher and you're trying to play left-handed. I mean, it's complicated!

10:10

It is complicated. I get it. I have a left-handed kid, so I understand.

Jane 10:15

But it's also always made me curious about why are there so many right-handed people and so few left-handed people. Like why isn't everybody just right-handed or half of all people are right-handed and half of all people are left-handed. And Chris McManus helped us understand a little bit more about that. It's a conundrum for scientists, too. And a conundrum means something that is unsolved, a problem that you can't quite figure out. So here's a little bit of that episode.

Chris McManus 10:42

I think the basic answer is that we're mostly right-handed but and some of us are left-handed, because we inherit it that way. So if you have two parents who are right-handed, you're much more likely to be

right-handed, than if you have two parents who are left-handed. So we inherit something here. There's something in our genes, which makes us mostly right-handed. Why we're mostly right-handed is a different question. And it probably comes from the fact that our brain is asymmetric. And so I'm talking to you at the moment with the left half of my brain. And most people use the left half of their brain to talk. So our brains are very asymmetric.

Jane 11:30

And asymmetric means not the same on either side.

Chris McManus 11:32

Our brains are different on the right and left sides. With the left half being what we call dominant; it's the more important one for language. And where that comes from is the next question. Because, as always, when you ask why you can ask why for the next question, and why for the answer to that question. And probably, in the long term, all of these things go down to the other thing that's makes us very different on the two sides, and which we don't think much about. And that's that my heart is on the left side of my body. That's true of almost all humans. Only about one in 10,000 people have their heart on the right side. And probably the fact that our brain is different on the two sides has developed from the fact that actually our bodies are different on the two sides.

Jane 12:28

That's fascinating. Because we think of our bodies as looking pretty much the same on both sides.

Chris McManus 12:34

We do think about our bodies being, looking pretty much the same on the two sides, and they are on the outside. Because if one leg, say, was much longer than another, than the other, you run in circles or something. You need to be the same when you're doing things in the world. But look inside our bodies, ask a surgeon about what's going on inside your tummy and your abdomen, or inside your chest, and they'll tell you the liver's on one side, the spleen's on the other, the appendix is here, the and so on and so on.

Jane 13:10

But when it comes to handedness, a good minority of people, 10%, that's not nothing, about 10% of us are left-handed. So why what is what is going on there? Why? Why is anybody left-handed then?

Chris McManus 13:23

If you think about it, there's three possible ways you could be. It could be that half the people in the world are right-handed and half the people in the world are left-handed. Interestingly, that's the way most animals are. But that's not like humans. And of course, the thing that makes people different from animals, people do write, and animals don't write. But really, people speak and use language. And animals don't speak and write and use language. I hate to say it, but although all the children listening to this will understand it and enjoy it, the cats and dogs won't understand a word of it, of course, because it's only humans who have language. And that language is, in most people, in the left half of the brain. And so that that means that right and left different. And then at that point, you'd say, well, instead of being half or half of people are right-handed and half the people are left-handed, why isn't

everybody right-handed and have language in their left hemisphere? Why are there any left-handers at all? And the simple answer to that somewhere has to be that there has to be an advantage to being left-handed. If there weren't an advantage to being left-handed, there probably wouldn't be left-handers.

Jane 14:47

Do you have any sense of what that advantage might be?

Chris McManus 14:50

My guess is that left handers, I think, are much more special. They're bought in--if you were buying a suit, you'd say they're bespoke. They're tailored for the particular person. They have different combinations of things in their brain. Because it's not just language, which is on one side; there's all sorts of other things on the two halves of the brain. And my suspicion is that left-handers have some things on the right and some on the left. And that, very often, that gives them an advantage. They become more skilled at particular things. And the sort of things which might be the case, there's a suggestion that left-handers are better at music. There's a suggestion that left-handers are better at mathematics. And those are sort of thing, the sort of skills, that may be better they, they may be better at certain sports. And that's the sort of thing that would mean that left-handers would have enough of them advantaged to survive, I'm afraid the very obvious problems of being left handed. You know, the world is a right-handed world. If you buy a lot of products, you'll find they're not designed for left-handers to use. A lot of tools and that sort of thing. So left-handers must have something going for them. That means that they continue to survive even though the right handers make it quite hard for them sometimes.

Jane 16:13

That was researcher and author Chris McManus. His book about handedness is a book for adults and it's called "Right Hand, Left Hand: The Origins of Asymmetry in Brains, Bodies, Atoms and Cultures." And our episode with him is called "Why are some people left-handed?"

16:14

All right, coming up two more episodes we loved making this year.

BREAK 16:19

Jane 16:19

This is But Why. And today, Melody Bodette. and I are sharing our favorite episodes from the past year. Do you have another favorite, Melody?

16:45

Absolutely. I don't think it'll surprise anyone who's ever listened to this podcast, to know that we like animals. And you all like animals too, because you send us so many animal questions. And I really liked this question that we got from a kid in Quebec.

Jacob 16:58

My name is Jacob, and I'm four years old. Why pigs do this [snorting noise]?

17:04

Okay, so he wanted to know why pigs go [snorting noise]. And I love this question, because you can take it in two different ways, really. You can explore why pigs make that snoring noise that they do. And you can also wonder, why do we call that noise oink oink. It doesn't actually sound like oink. And I can make a better pig noise than that. So I don't know why when we're talking, we just don't go [snorting noise]. And so we put that question to a linguist. That's a person who studies language. And her name was Arika Okrent

Arika Okrent 17:31

We are giving a name for the sound, which is it's a difficult concept because we understand that we have words for things out there in the world. So you see something and you it has a word: that's a house, or that's a picture, or that's a bag, whatever it is. We realize that the word itself doesn't look like the thing we're talking about. But when it comes to sounds, when we name a sound, we have the expectation that it should sound like the sound. And in some ways it does, that we have a word beep. And that kind of sounds like a beep. But it's not exactly the same. It's not [beep noise] or whatever an actual beep sounds like. Because we've given it a name. And when we do that, when we give a sound a name, we're restricted to what our language can do, and what it is allowed to do. And there's a million sounds that the human voice can make. But languages only use a subset of those. And different languages use different subsets of those. So English has these sounds and French has those sounds, and different languages take advantage of different human sounds. And that's what we have to use when we give a name to a sound. So they're going to be different in different languages.

Jane 19:02

So, like, in English, you might say a bird says tweet tweet. And in Spanish, you might say it says pío pío. And you can hear even in the way I'm using my voice and raising it up high, I'm kind of making the sound of a bird but it's different from those two languages. In a case like that, is it mostly just that's what people kind of chose and copied each other? Or is that about what our languages tell us we can do as well?

19:31

Well, we can, when you're saying it in a more colorful manner, and you can say, tweet, tweet or cheep cheep and you can sound like the bird. But I can also say, oh, that bird was tweeting all morning. In which case it doesn't sound at all like the the actual sound. It's now just the label for that thing that birds do.

Jane 19:52

Speaking of birds, let's hear how you talk about birds in your languages.

Various Kids 19:56

Jane 19:56

It's kind of interesting that crows get a specific noise, when for lots of other birds, we lump their sounds together and just say they're tweeting. I asked Arika, if we weren't writing things down, would we need to have words for these sounds? Like, if we were just speaking, I could say the pig went [snorting noise]. But I don't know how to write [snorting noise].

20:43

Yeah, we would still have those words. Languages that aren't written have names for sounds too. Because when I'm in a conversation with you, it takes a lot to sort of stop and go [snorting noise]. Like that's not in the normal stream of speech. And it takes a little extra effort. And we want to be able to speak in the language we're using and stay in that zone. While we're talking. So we, it's good to have words that let us do that from within the limitations of the language.

Jane 21:13

Do you think there is a named sound for every animal, even animals that don't really make sounds?

Arika Okrent 21:21

No. If the animal doesn't really have cultural importance, then we don't really need a sound for the sound that it makes. So in Turkish, they don't have a pig sound. Because in the culture, the pig is not in, it's not in farms, and these sort of settings that children's books will be about or children's songs will be about, because it's just not an element of the culture. And we don't have sounds for, you know, what sound does a sloth make, or I don't know, I don't know if they even make sounds. But it's not something that's in the culture as going down to the farm and hear what all the animals say, or going into the woods and hearing what the animal say, it has to have some place in the culture to be important enough to have a word to talk about that sound.

Jane 22:20

So in fact, when we talk about animal noises, and we know that word that we know, oink means a pig. And if you speak English, you probably know oink is in reference to a pig that, in some ways, says a lot more about our culture than anything else. It's what we think is important to name that gets a name for the sound that it makes.

Arika Okrent 22:43

Yes. And it's something that's either in the stories that we tell, or in the things that we talk about with each other, it's got to have a reason to be given a word. And that's true, not just for animal sounds, but for everything we have, the words we have, because they're a shorthand way of referring to the thing we want to talk about. And different languages have different words that that don't always match, that don't always directly translate from one to the other. Because it's not something you need this abbreviated way of referring to and that's what a word is.

Melody 23:24

Alright, so that was linguist Arika Okrent. And also in that episode, we learned about how pigs communicate and what we actually know about the noises they make.

Jane 23:31

And another cool thing in that episode, Melody, was that we asked kids like you who are listening now to send us how you say animal noises in other languages, like people don't say oink, oink if they're speaking Spanish or Chinese when they're talking about the sound that a pig makes. And so we got all of these amazing replies from you.

Melody 23:52

If you're interested, check out that episode. It's called "Why do pigs oink?" Alright, Jane, do you have a last episode for us?

Jane 23:59

Yeah, I do. So this one is not as fun and lighthearted as the animal noises episode. But I felt like it was an important one and one that actually is still a valuable thing to listen to today. So toward the beginning of the year, we started hearing from kids who were learning about something in the news. And were a little bit confused, because a lot of times the news is geared for adults. And kids wanted to better understand what was happening. And I'm talking about the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which turned into a war when Russia invaded its neighbor at the end of February. So we thought we would tackle this episode and help you understand what was happening. And we talked with Erin Hutchinson, who's an assistant professor of Russian History at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Let's just play a little bit of that episode.

Jedi 24:49

Hi, my name is Jedi. I live in Ravenna, Ohio. I just turned 10. My question is, why is Russia attacking Ukraine?

Jane 24:59

Erin, can you help Let's understand why Russia is attacking another country called Ukraine.

Erin Hutchinson 25:06

That is a really great question. And in order to understand that we need to go back in history a little bit, actually kind of a lot, maybe. We can even go back a thousand years, I think I'll just, I'll just go back about 400. So this is before the Soviet Union ever existed, but there was a country we call the Russian Empire. And in the 17th century, it began acquiring territory that forms today's Ukraine, and began bringing new people into the Empire. And this was a process that took place in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Jane 25:41

So that's the 1600s. And the 1700s.

Erin Hutchinson 25:44

Yes, exactly. So as a part of this process of incorporating this new territory, people in the Russian Empire, especially the rulers of the country, began to emphasize that the reason why they should bring in this these new lands is because the people who lived there who moved today call Ukrainians were really part of the Russian people. And so this idea emerged, and by the time we get to the 1800s, or the 19th century, it was that really the official policy of the Russian imperial government that there was no

difference between Russia and Ukrainians, really, they were all part of the same nation. But this Ukrainian sort of national identity didn't didn't go away. And in fact, over time, it became stronger.

Jane 26:34

But each time Ukraine tried to be independent, it was brought back in to be together with Russia. In the last century, it was one of the republics that made up that country called the Soviet Union.

Erin Hutchinson 26:45

It was, at the time that it existed, it was the world's largest country. But in 1991, the government ultimately began to fall apart. And the 15 different republics, as they were called, that formed the Soviet Union, became independent. But there are people in the Russian government today who see the collapse of the Soviet Union as basically wrong, and that Ukraine really should be brought back into, either incorporated into Russia today, or they would like to see Ukraine basically kind of stay very close friends with Russia, the Ukrainian government, as opposed to having more ties and connections to Europe and the United States.

Jane 27:32

So I mean, it's interesting, it sounds like for hundreds and hundreds of years, there's been tension; there's been this conflict about identity and whether they should be together or apart. And, and that this is not something new, this is something that's been happening in the in the region for a very, very long time. Does that sound right?

Erin Hutchinson 27:52

That does sound right. In general, we can say that, on the part of Ukrainians, there has been a desire to have autonomy or independence. Not all Ukrainians all the time. But in general, we can say this is something that Ukrainian people have sought. But there has been also pressure from the Russian government to sort of keep them under their control, kind of inside their state or very closely allied are connected to them. So it's a conflict with some pretty deep historical roots.

Jane 28:23

I mean, if I were thinking about it may be kind of like what might happen on the playground or in a cafeteria: let's say I'm Ukraine and I have been sitting at the same lunch table with Russia for a long time. And sometimes we're really good friends, and we even share our lunch. And sometimes we're not great friends, but we've still kind of been sitting at the same lunch table. But I now want to go over and sit at a lunch table with some other people who have other European country names. Like I want to be at the same lunch table with more like France and Germany and Poland, and the United Kingdom and the United States--even though they're kind of far away, I kind of want to be closer to the United States. And Russia is saying, "No, you have to still sit at this lunch table with me. You can't leave that lunch table. And if you go over to that table, it leaves me feeling more vulnerable, or like I might not be safe anymore if you're over with those other countries. So I need you here at the lunch table with me."

Erin Hutchinson 29:22

That sounds like a pretty good comparison. And, you know, I think part of the reason why Ukraine wants to go and sit at someone else's lunch table is that there's been a long history with Russia. And

during the times when Ukraine and Russia were very close friends, a lot of bad things happened to Ukraine. You know, it's not coming out of nowhere that Ukraine wants to sit at a different lunch table.

Jane 29:46

And Russia might not sit by itself either. Right? It might say, "Hey, China, do you want to come and sit at this lunch table with me?" Like, there are different countries around the world that are getting involved in this and see a benefit it or a cost to certain ways that this could play out. And so different countries are getting involved, even if they're not Ukraine and Russia, right?

Erin Hutchinson 30:08

Yeah, definitely. There's different alliances different sort of friendships and groups of friends among countries. And that's one of the reasons why this Russian invasion of Ukraine is so scary to people is that not only is what happening in Ukraine right now really terrible, and a lot of people are being hurt. But there's also worries that other countries could be drawn into this conflict as well, so that it could become something bigger that we hope we hope that won't happen.

Jane 30:35

That was Russian history professor ERin Hutchinson talking to us back in March.

Melody 30:41

Yeah. And it's hard to believe, Jane, that this war is actually still going on. And it's almost coming up on a year.

Jane 30:46

Yeah. And it's been obviously really devastating for people in Ukraine. But it's also had effects around the world, you know, people have had to deal with things like rising prices for food and gasoline. And in some cases, people who were fleeing Ukraine trying to get out of the way of the war, were going to other countries. And so people in other countries were seeing some disruption because of that. And in Russia, people have been dealing with what are called sanctions where other countries won't provide goods to Russia, or won't give them payment for things in the same way. So this is really reverberating, or being felt, around the world.

Melody 31:23

talking about war is really hard. And it's a challenging thing. And so even as kids, it's important to kind of know what started that conflict, and to try to better understand what's going on. When we learn about hard things in the news, it's good to have context for what's behind that situation.

Jane 31:39

Yeah, and it's one of my favorite things about making this show is that we get to talk about those really challenging things, and help us all have a little bit more understanding about the world as we move forward. And so I really appreciate that we get to do these kinds of episodes alongside the ones about why some people are left-handed or you know why we say things for animal noises. I like having that variety in this show.

Melody 32:06

Well, Jane, it's been fun discussing some of our favorite episodes with you. And by the way, we're approaching 200 episodes of But Why so we have hours and hours worth of episodes for you to listen back to you don't have to wait two weeks for new episodes to come out.

Jane 32:19

And if you've been listening for a while, you probably already know this. But if you have a question about anything, you can send it to us! Have an adult record you by using a smartphone, there's usually a free voice recording app they can use. Make sure you get right up close to your adult's phone so that we can hear your beautiful voice very clearly. And don't forget to tell us your first name, where you live and how old you are.

Melody 32:42

And we get something like 60 to 80 questions a week. So unfortunately, we can't answer every one that we receive, but we do listen to all of them and we love to hear what's on your mind.

Jane 32:51

Melody, you want to do the credits with me.

Melody 32:53

All right. But Why is produced by me, I'm Melody Bodette, along with you...

Jane 32:58

I'm Jane Lindholm. We make the show at Vermont Public and we're distributed by PRX.

Melody 33:02

Our awesome theme music is by Luke Reynolds.

Jane 33:05

We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then,

Melody and Jane 33:09

stay curious.