

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

Why are brothers and sisters so annoying?

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Jane 00:20

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. Today we're talking about a very special family relationship, potentially one of the longest relationships some of you will ever have in your lifetime: the sibling relationship. That's right, today we're talking about brothers and sisters and all the different kinds of siblings you might have. Love them or hate them, they can be an integral part of your early life and shape who you become. Not everyone has a sibling, and that's great! But in the United States, 80% of people have at least one, and while there's a lot of focus on the influence parents have on who we become, studies suggest siblings can have even more of an impact on our development. But before we dig into that, first a very important question.

Taylor 01:14

Hi, I'm Taylor, and I'm five, from Melbourne, and how do brothers and sisters turn to brothers and sisters?

Jane 01:23

Your brothers and sisters are your siblings. And siblings are children in the same family who share at least one parent. So you get your siblings when your parent or parents decide to add you or another child to the family. Sometimes that's through birth or adoption. You can also have siblings that you only share one parent with. Sometimes people call this a half-sibling, which is kind of funny, because they're definitely a full person. And you can get stepsiblings if one of your parents marries someone who already has kids. Some families care for kids temporarily through foster care or other arrangements. And those kids can also be your siblings, even if they only live with you for a short time. There are a lot of different kinds of families, and so there are actually a lot of ways to get a sibling. Research shows, though, whether your sibling is your step, half, or full sibling, they can still have an impact on your development. Interestingly enough, most studies of sibling relationships don't even differentiate between the kinds of siblings.

Charlotte 02:27

I'm Charlotte, and I'm five years old. I live in London, Ontario, Canada, and my question is, why do brothers and sisters look a lot alike?

Jane 02:38

Sometimes siblings look a lot alike, and sometimes they don't look alike at all! Sometimes you look alike because you share genetic material with your siblings. You get half your genes from a male biological parent and half from a female, but the genes you get are randomly assigned, so siblings can

get different combinations, and some traits are more heritable--more easily passed down--than others. There are also environmental influences, both in your genetics and in how you choose to look. Maybe you and your siblings dress similarly or make the same facial expressions or say the same kind of things because you live together. So your similarities are not just genetic. And sometimes we try our absolute hardest to look and behave nothing like our siblings! So you and your siblings might look a lot alike, or you might look very different, whether you share DNA or not.

Jane 03:29

When I was a kid, people used to see me out with my stepfather, and they'd sometimes stop us and tell us how much we looked alike. We always smiled and said thank you. But then we kind of giggled a little bit afterwards, because we aren't biologically related at all. But we did spend a lot of time together when I was a kid, so it kind of makes sense that we would look alike. And your genetics certainly don't define how you feel about your family or how much they love you. Beyond the story of how you got your siblings or whether or not you look alike, your siblings can have a big impact on who you become. One author we know has spent a lot of time thinking about and researching why that is. So we called her up to talk a little bit about what she's learned. Susan Dominus writes for The New York Times Magazine, and one of her books is called The Family Dynamic.

Susan Dominus 04:22

I actually started off thinking about how to write a book about how parents help their kids dream big and go about achieving those dreams. I was really interested in parents who encouraged their kids to think they could change the world. When I started reporting the book, what I was hearing from these, you know, incredible siblings from families like this, although they talked about their parents, they also talked about the way their siblings helped them get to the point that they were trying to reach. And I realized that that was kind of an underappreciated piece of the puzzle in general, when people think about how people become who they are.

Jane 05:00

And what did you find from the families that you interviewed?

Susan Dominus 05:04

Well, I think I found often that the parents were the ones who were maybe setting a tone in the family and setting--maybe they were inspiring people themselves in some not necessarily famous way, but a way that was really meaningful to the kids, you know, maybe they had immigrated from afar, a country overseas, and had built new lives so their kids could have better opportunities, or maybe they had overcome racial stereotypes in order to succeed, and at times where the world was not really conspiring to help them do that, but the siblings, it turned out, were often very helpful in giving logistical advice and pointing them in the right directions. And older siblings can really guide the way for younger siblings, because they understand how the school works, they've looked at their friends and seen what worked for them, and they can pass that information down. And sometimes kids, especially teenagers, would much rather have advice from a sibling, even a sibling that they sometimes fight with, they'd still rather have that advice come from a sibling than a parent, because teenagers really don't like to do what their parents want them to do a lot of the time.

Jane 06:13

Research into siblings backs up what Susan Dominus found in her reporting. Siblings are family, but they're also kind of like a peer or friend relationship. You learn how to get along with people by learning how to get along with your sibling with the safety that they'll always still be your sibling. But that doesn't necessarily mean it's easy. We have a question from Julia.

Julia 06:34

I am nine years old. I live in Tarragona, Spain, and my question is, why do I fight with my sister if I love her?

Susan Dominus 06:44

I think that sibling tensions are very, very natural. And, you know, I don't know this is the kind of thing you can prove, but evolutionary biologists would say it really all comes down to resources, or a feeling of resources. It's hard to avoid the feeling that, you know, love is a pie, and that the bigger your sister's slice is, that means the smaller yours is. But one of my favorite short story collections is called Love is Not a Pie, meaning it doesn't deplete. You know, if you give some to one person, it doesn't mean there's not enough for the other person. And so I think part of getting older is realizing that there's enough to go around. But I also think that siblings are trying to differentiate from each other, and that also it's just unfortunate for siblings that people tend to compare them, and I think that puts people kids, especially in an uncomfortable place sometimes.

Jane 07:43

I love that. Susan mentioned the short story, Love is Not a Pie. It's one of my favorite short stories (written for adults), but also the author, Amy Bloom, was on our show several years ago in an episode called "How does it feel when your family changes?" You might enjoy listening to that one. And research has shown that having a younger sibling teaches older siblings things like empathy--that's the ability to understand how someone else might be feeling--and to work on social skills like sharing and playing.

Jane 08:14

Coming up: if having siblings is so great, why do they drive you nuts?

BREAK 08:19

BREAK

Nagore 08:21

This is But Why, from Vermont Public. I'm Jane Lindholm. We're learning about brothers and sisters and siblings. Today we're speaking with Susan Dominus. She wrote a book about families where multiple siblings did big things as teenagers and adults. She wanted to know what was happening in those families that led to the children becoming what are sometimes called high achievers. The book is called The Family Dynamic. It's a book written for adults, but Susan likes thinking about and talking with kids, too, so she was excited to answer your questions. Here's one we got from a lot of you.

Nagore 08:53

I'm Nagore. I'm 10 years old, and I live in Colombia, close to Bogota. Why don't siblings get along perfectly?

Marin 09:05

Hi, my name is Marin. I'm eight years old, and I live in Garrett, Indiana, and my question is, why do siblings fight a lot?

Phoebe 09:17

Hi, my name is Phoebe. I live in Barbadoes. I am six years old. Why are little sisters and brothers so annoying? And goodbye.

Ruby 09:27

My name is Ruby. I'm seven years old. I live in Fair Oaks, California. My question is, why are brothers and sisters so annoying? [Annoying little brother noises]

Speaker 1 09:44

[Laughs] I think it is a little bit of just a question of proximity. You know what I mean? Even roommates who live together often, there are, you know, they start to get on each other's nerves. There's just so many little choices and tasks and interactions that happen over the course of the day. I think, with siblings, it's even more complicated, because your sibling is just enough like you, maybe, that you think that you should get along perfectly, but siblings actually are also just different enough that they're going to have different points of view, different tastes, different personalities. And I think that sometimes we feel what's known as cognitive dissonance when we look at someone and say, "You're my sibling, you might even look like me. Why is it that you, of all people, don't see things the way that I do?" And I think that can be really frustrating and surprising to us, maybe.

Jane 10:35

Your siblings are learning to have a relationship with their peers through their relationship with you and any other siblings. Often that means testing out new strategies, whether they realize that's what they're doing or not. So maybe they're making an annoying noise and waiting to see your reaction. If you think it's funny, maybe they'll try that noise with their friends. If you think it's annoying, well, maybe they'll learn. Of course, it's also totally possible they're just doing it to annoy you, and if you show you're annoyed, they might do it again.

Jane 11:05

Do sibling sibling relationships and the effect of having a sibling tend to flow from the oldest sibling down to the youngest? Does the oldest sibling always set the tone or always create the conflict or always create the support to help another sibling succeed? Or can it be mixed, depending on, you know, where you fall in the family?

Speaker 1 11:28

Even at a young age, we do know that there is something called a sibling spillover effect, and what that finds is that when one sibling starts doing better in school, the other siblings do as well, and there's a kind of complicated way that they were able to figure out that it's not because of how their parenting,

you know, has been changed, or because of some genetic overlap. I won't bore you with the details, but scientists were very clever about how to do a study that separated that out so they can really see that no, no, it's the way that the sibling is behaving that's changing the other sibling. And those effects can actually work in both directions. They can go older to younger, but also younger to older. I think even the older you get, the less the age of the siblings matters. You know, when everybody's out there in the world and they're doing their own thing, that's when you really see, often, a kind of network effect of siblings who are helping each other. Because, you know, when you're 36 years old, it doesn't matter if your 32-year-old sister is the person who makes that introduction for you or gives you advice.

Jane 12:36

Does that work for things like musical instruments and playing sports too, or just in school?

Speaker 1 12:42

There's not tons of research about that, but I would assume it works for all kinds of things. You know, there's like a fun fact: There are some researchers who have been trying to make the case that younger siblings are over-represented, actually, in sports, and that's because of this idea of differentiation, because the oldest sibling, for various reasons, maybe because the parents put the most pressure on them, that's what some research suggests, but the oldest siblings tend to be the most academically strong, and so then younger siblings think, "Well, I'm not going to be able to own that, so I'm going to instead throw myself into sports." It's not like we think that they're biologically more athletic for some reason. It just seems to be a choice in how they invest their energy.

Jane 13:26

Parents have an effect on cognitive development--brain development--of their oldest kids, because they often spend the most one on one time with their eldest child. There are no other kids to compete for their attention. But those benefits are then passed down to the younger children by that eldest child, especially around literacy, reading. Older siblings looking at books with their younger siblings can help them learn to read. And the eldest's own reading ability is improved by spending that time reading with their younger siblings. But are there limits to the sibling relationship?

Akira 13:59

My name is Akira, and I'm six years old, and I'm from Japan, and my question is, can my sister be my best friend?

Speaker 1 14:11

I mean, when that works, it's the greatest thing ever. I can tell you that my sister is probably my best friend. And we have...we are really different. In fact, we look so different that when we were little, somebody once put my sister in one room and me in another room, and these kids grilled us on what our father's middle name was and things like that, because they couldn't believe we were sisters. And we have fought plenty over the years. And I'll tell you a little secret: we still fight sometimes. But she's also my best friend, and I feel so lucky every day that she was the person plunked into my family along with me. And, in fact, I even moved around the corner from my sister when I was trying to figure out where to land with my husband before we even had a family.

Jane 14:55

Sibling dynamics tend to change as kids get older, and the kids who are older start to allow younger siblings more power in the relationship. That shift can be messy, but it's important to developing the relationship that will exist throughout your adulthood. In Susan's book, she wrote about how siblings will often push each other to be better people. They can compete with each other and make each other better.

Speaker 1 15:16

So for example, I wrote about the Holifield family, which is a sibling of civil rights activists who came out of Tallahassee, Florida at a time when it was really hard to be a young Black person in this country. You know, one of the siblings, when she was only 16 years old, decided that she was going to be one of the only three kids who were Black who desegregated the biggest, best high school in the capital of Florida, which was the last of all of the states, apparently, to integrate.

Jane 15:45

Integration was bringing together Black and white students into the same schools. This was happening in the 1950s and 1960s. Students were educated separately before that because of racism and racist laws.

Speaker 1 15:58

And her older brother, Bishop, said he looked at her and thought, "Wow, she's really set the bar really high, and now I want to honor that and live up to it." And when he got to law school at Harvard, he started the Black Law Students Association, which was one of the first kind of groups like that on any law school. And it was hugely influential. He helped bring the first Black law professors to Harvard Law School. Then other schools followed suit. And so there's all kinds of ways that siblings can inspire each other and really go on to do great things.

Speaker 2 16:35

Susan, what if you don't have a sibling?

Speaker 1 16:37

It's funny. I just had dinner last night with a young woman who is an only child, and she was telling me that she kind of instinctively became friendly with lots of lots of young women her age, and almost would describe many of those friends like a sister. And I think, in some ways, to have a friend who's like a sister, but with all the baggage of actually being a sister, hey, that's like, that's maybe even the best case scenario. There are really special things about having a sibling, but there are also really special things about being an only child and having your parents' undivided attention and not ever being compared to anybody else, not having to deal with the day-to-day irritations of maybe sharing a room or sharing a bathroom, waiting your turn. I think there are a lot of tensions in life that are very painful, from which you're really completely liberated.

Jane 17:28

Whatever your relationship with your siblings, or if you are the only child in your family, your relationships with your family shape your future in important ways. There's no wrong or right way to have a family.

Jane 17:40

That's it for this episode. As always, if you have a question about anything, have an adult record you asking it on a smartphone using an app like Voice Memos. Then have your adult email the file to questions@butwhykids.org. Our show is produced by Sarah Baik, Melody Bodette and me, Jane Lindholm, at Vermont Public and distributed by PRX. Our video producer is Joey Palumbo, and our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. If you like our show, please have your adults help you give us a thumbs up or a review on whatever podcast platform you use to listen to us. It helps other kids and families find us. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious!