But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

How Are Babies Made?

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[Elizabeth] How does mommies get babies in their tummies?

[Jane] This is *But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids* from Vermont Public Radio. I'm Jane Lindholm.

On this podcast we take your questions and we find answers and you have questions about all kinds of things because you are interested in the world around you. You're also interested in how you got to be in this world. So today we're tackling this question.

[Wade] My name is Wade. I'm seven years old. I live in Charlottesville, Virginia. And my question is how are babies made?

[Jane] That's right. We're talking about how babies are made. We've made this episode with our youngest listeners in mind, so parents don't be nervous. There are many books that answer questions about where we come from. But one book we particularly like is called *What Makes a Baby*. It was written by this guy.

[Cory] My name is Cory. My job, I mean I have a few jobs. One is that I get to write for kids about sexuality, about gender and about bodies. And then I also teach. So I teach grownups how to talk both to kids and other grownups about all sorts of things that grownups find it hard to talk about.

[Jane] In his book *What Makes a Baby*, Cory Silverberg starts out by reminding kids and grownups that there are really two questions: what makes a baby in general, and then the more specific question that is unique to you. Where did you come from and what's the story about how you were made? That's a question only your parents, or parent, or the adults who love you can answer but the question of how babies are made is one we can talk about.

And Wade isn't the only one of you who has this question.

[Elizabeth] Hi. My name is Elizabeth. I'm three years old. I want to know how does mommies get babies in their tummies?

[Benny] I'm Benny, I'm four years old. I live in West Berlin, Vermont. I'm wondering how can people get made?

[Cory] These are great questions. And the truth is there's lots of ways that babies get into their mommies and lots of ways to make a baby including sometimes, you should know, that some of us are born and we're not even in our mommies at all. The first thing I usually like to say is no matter how a baby gets in there, there are some things that are true for all of us, right so for all humans and this is kind of a cool thing that there's some things we all share. So to be born we need three things really, we need to start with an egg. We need to start with a sperm. And those come from two different bodies and then we need a third body part which is called a uterus which is where we grow, where this tiny, tiny thing grows into a baby which is the thing that you are when you're born.

How we get in there which is the question that certainly Elizabeth is asking really depends on who's making the baby. And it depends on their bodies. So some grownups can do it all by themselves. They just need the two bodies and they don't really need help from anyone else. Some grownups need to get an egg or a sperm or even both from other people. Sometimes you have two people who really want to make a baby but they don't have a uterus so they don't have a place for the baby to grow. The amazing thing is that there are now ways for almost every one to figure out how to make a baby. And the thing I'll also say is that no matter how you make a baby when that baby is finally born it really feels like a, particularly to grown ups, a kind of miracle.

And so the other thing I wanted to say is to Elizabeth, just so you know, even though it really looks like the baby is growing in a tummy it's actually growing in this other place called the uterus so it's a little lower down.

[Jane] But when you see somebody who's very pregnant it looks like it's in their belly it looks like.

[Cory] Absolutely.

[Jane] Because that part of your body gets pushed out.

[Cory] It gets big, big, big. Yeah. That's an amazing thing. I mean our bodies are so amazing because everything is in there really tight. And then you could actually grow a baby inside of there. So yeah it's hard to tell where it really is but it's not like when you eat the baby feels the food coming down or anything like that.

[Jane] Cory, you said, one of the amazing things is that you might not even be in your mom's tummy at all, can you explain that?

[Cory] Well, for example, some of us are adopted. So your mom and your dad or your moms or your dads or whoever it is but you're let's say mom, your mom didn't actually ever carry you because you were adopted, so you actually grew and were born in someone else's body. And we called that body a lot of different names sometimes called ‘the biological mom’ or ‘the birth mom,’ ‘the life giver’ sometimes. But not all of us it's important to know that not all of us are born the same way. There's also a situation sometimes where you have two people, like sometimes you might have two men who want to be dads. They don't have a uterus at all and they can actually do a thing. They can find someone who gets called a surrogate who actually carry a baby for them. So again you might have parents that have no uterus that you wouldn't call mommies and still be a kid and still have been born.

[Jane] Does that all make sense to you? Let me just recap. There are three things that are always needed to make a baby. The first two ingredients are sperm and egg. Sperm looked like little tadpoles. And when one attaches itself to an egg and gets inside that egg, a baby can grow from the combination of the egg and the sperm and where it grows is a uterus. Inside a uterus, that's the third thing that is needed to make a baby. Now female bodies usually have eggs and male bodies usually have sperm and sometimes two people make a baby on their own. And sometimes people who want to have a baby need help from a doctor. And as Cory mentioned there are lots of different kinds of parents.

[Scarlett] Why can girls have babies but boys can’t?

[Jane] That's Scarlett. She's seven years old and lives in Los Angeles, California and she wants to know why girls can have babies but boys cannot?

[Cory] This is a really good question Scarlett and I have a kind of surprising answer for you because even though you've probably only ever heard of women having babies and even though almost all the time it is girls or women that have babies sometimes it's different. So I need to explain this part, to give birth what you need is you need the uterus. People who have uteruses are the ones that can give birth. A baby can come out of your body because the uterus is the part where the baby grows. But most people who have a uterus are girls or women. But sometimes a boy or man can have a uterus and those men with a uterus can give birth. So it is true that almost all the time it's girls that have babies but not all of the time.

[Jane] You know one of the things that you're bringing up here Cory is that there's a difference between having a uterus and being a woman or a girl. And right and you may be female or you may have been born female a if you have a uterus but that's scientific definition. And the idea of whether you are a girl and you feel like a girl or feel like a mommy is very different than the science of what your body parts are.

[Cory] Right. Well this is the funny thing that no one ever tells us when we're growing up which is the body that you're born with doesn't actually tell you who you are, right? Most of the time when you're born a doctor a midwife looks down at your body and if they see a penis then they'll say ‘oh it's a boy.’ And if they see a vulva, they say ‘oh it's a girl’ but being a boy or girl is much more than the body parts you have. So you actually have some people who have penises but are they are absolutely clear that they're not boys they're girls or maybe they feel like something different and you have some people that are born with a vulva and a uterus on the inside, someone who could become who could give birth. But they're very clear they're like they're not I'm not a girl. So for most of us it works one way, right. Most people who are born and they're called boys are boys and grow up to be men. Most people are born and called girls again are girls and grow up to be women. But the amazing thing about humans is that we are all a little bit different and there's so many different options.

[Lauryn] My name is Lauryn. I’m five years old. I live in Newton, Utah. My question I how come babies don't hatch out of eggs?

[Jane] Yeah, Cory. How come babies don't hatch out of eggs? You said all babies are made starting with a sperm which kind of looks like a tadpole and an egg. So why don't we hatch out of egg?

[Cory] This is again a very smart question. We're animals and other animals do hatch that way but humans, human animals don't hatch out of a hard egg like a chick. So here's a little fun fact, Lauryn, if you're interested in kind of sciencey things, so the kind of animal that humans are we're called mammals and out of all the mammals, people, like things like humans and cats and dogs and elephants. There's only a few that actually lay eggs. So if you're interested of the platypus lays eggs and there's different kinds of spiny anteaters who do too. But other than that all the mammals like us don't, so it's just not the way we do it. Instead of having a hard shell, so we grow in this hard hard shell out in the world we grows inside someone's body and that body. So usually our mother is the body is the thing that protects us in the uterus. And in fact this is more information but the person who gives birth actually grows a special thing, a special organ inside their body just to take care of the baby. Just like that hard shell takes care of a baby. So you know there's a lot of answers to this question but it just it just isn't the way we humans do it.

[Jane] You could almost think of it like the body of the person who's carrying the baby is like the egg in a way because it's that protection.

[Cory] It is like the egg in a way, but it doesn't crack.

[Jane] Yes. Thank goodness. All right here's another question.

[Sander] Hi my name is Sander. I live in Duxbury, Vermont. I'm three years old. I want to know why does my dad has nipples, and why do I too?

[Jane] In case you couldn't hear that that was why do my dad and I have nipples even though we're boys basically?

[Cory] Right. And I want to tell Sander this is actually you'd be surprised I get so many questions about nipples. And because it's such an important question I actually have two answers for you. So the first thing to know is that almost everyone has nipples. And the reason for this is that before we're born when we're just beginning to grow we're just a tiny thing, all of us start out pretty much the same and we developed some body parts that we all have by the time we're born so are all human. So all humans have like we all have a heart. We all have bones. We all have lungs and we all have a brain. And amazingly we all have nipples. Well, almost all of us because the thing to know is that beyond the sort of does sort of look like a basic kind of model of human that we all get when we're all a little bit different.

So most of us have two nipples but actually you might not know this but some of us have three or more. Most of us have two arms but some of us have one or none. So it's pretty amazing.

You might kind of wonder. I'm not sure. I think maybe part of the wonder is like why does your dad have nipples, because it seems like you don't, maybe he doesn't use them for anything right. Yeah. And the thing to know that again the amazing thing about the human body is we all have body parts we don't use look up things like the appendix or tonsils and these are body parts that we all have but we really don't have much of a purpose. So there's kind of what some people call useless body parts and some people think that had to have nipples are like that. But the truth is we all have them.

[Jane] But Cory everybody who has an appendix that's not useful body part for females and for males right, but nipples, women who have babies or people who have babies and give birth but their nipples make milk for the babies and the boys, the male nipples don't ever make milk.

[Cory] You're right. The reason we all have them though is we actually all start out the same and you look at what we're like when we first start growing. There is no such thing as a boy or girl. We're all actually the same. And as we're growing one of the things that grows is the thing that will become nipples. And also it's interesting that you ask that thing about breastfeeding because most of us think that like well girls can grow up to have breasts but boys can't. But actually all of our bodies have something called breast tissue. So we do do this thing a bit like but boys are like this and girls are like that. But when you really get into it it's always more complicated.

[Ada] Hello my name is Ada, I'm nine years old from Oak Park, Illinois. And my question is how come some people look more like one parent more than the other parent?

[Cory] Right. This is such an interesting question, Ada. The thing to know is to make you the way you look, grownups usually the ones we call your parents, brought together a sperm and egg and inside that sperm and inside that egg there's all sorts of stories, and the scientific word for those stories is DNA. But I like to think about them as stories. So what you look like comes from the stories that were inside the sperm and the stories that were inside the egg which mixed together and they make you and there's no one in the world that's exactly like you because it's one special mix. And some of those stories are loud and some of those stories are kind of quieter. So I can give you this example so like inside the sperm, there's a story about what color your hair will be. And inside the egg there's a story about what color your hair will be. And when they come together the thing is only one story gets told in your body and again so some stories are louder than others. So if the sperm and the egg that made you came from your parents then you might look more like one than the other. But again if some of us are made with sperm and egg that didn't come from either parents so we might not look like our parents at all. What I find funny is that if you ever pay attention to grown-ups particularly when they're around babies they love to say oh she looks so much like her mom or she looks so much like her dad. And one person will say one thing and the other person will say the exact opposite. So that's also a kind of funny thing.

[Jane] When I was younger sometimes people would meet me when I was out with my stepfather and they just assumed that he was my biological dad. You two look so much alike, they would tell us. Now biologically we weren't related at all. So we always kind of giggled. But it does make some sense when you live with someone or spend a lot of time with them. You can pick up their facial expressions or you two wind up talking alike or you move your hands in the same way when you get really excited.

So there are lots of ways that we look like our parents but the biological similarities are what Cory is saying are strong or weak or you could say dominant or recessive and all that depends on what happens between the sperm and the egg. So again all of us were born after a sperm and an egg came together from two different people and grew inside the uterus. That's how babies are made. But every baby and every family is different. So if you are curious about your family you should ask. But here's something I want to tell you not all adults are totally comfortable with these questions and know how to answer them. Sometimes they get nervous trying to explain where you came from and how you were made.

And Cory has some advice for you if that happens.

[Cory] If they get nervous and start not having an answer for you, you can tell them just to relax. And if they say I don't know, you can ask them well how can we find out? There's lots of really good books and lots of good places online to look. But I will say one thing that the truth is that even though grownups know a lot when it comes to this stuff sometimes because they're so nervous they don't have a lot of answers so you need to be careful because some places have good answers, some places have answers that are more confusing than helpful.

[Jane] Thank you so much to Cory Silverberg. He's the author of *What Makes a Baby* which is written with all kinds of kids in mind. And he also has another book for slightly older kids called *Sex is a Funny Word.*

While we're talking about where we come from. Some of you have questions about names.

[Alina] Hi my name is Alina and I'm seven years old. This is my older brother.

[Adrian] Hi my name is Adrian. I am nine years old..

[Alina and Adrian] We live in Austin, Texas We wanted to ask where do people get their last names from?

[Misha] Hi my name is Misha. I'm nine years old and I live in Florida. My question is why do people have the same last name but are totally not related?

[Jane] It turns out last names, also sometimes called surnames, or family names, are kind of a recent invention. Now a long, long time ago many hundreds of years ago when humans used to live in one town for their whole lives and maybe not even ever travel outside their little community group, people were probably just known by their first name or given name.

So that guy over there would have been named Bob or Jose. But eventually there were so many Bobs, so many Jose's that people would have wanted to tell them apart when they were living in bigger and bigger communities and more and more generations or when they're moving around. And Bob from Svensk was going to be confused with Bob from Odessa.

Well that's when more than one name started to be common. Now in English-speaking countries sometimes people took last names related to their jobs or maybe related to where they lived. So like Smith if you worked with iron or metal you might have been a Smithie and that might be the name you chose. Carpenter, Cooper, Potter, Sheppard, Gardner these are all last names that are related to jobs or professions. Eventually people passed on those names to their children and it became the tradition for children

to take the last names of their fathers and women often changed their names to their husband’s names when they got married.

But that's not the case everywhere, even historically. In many Spanish-speaking countries people often have two last names. One with their mother's name and another with their father's name. And it used to be that the mother's name was passed down. It's more common now for the father's name to be passed on but not always. And there are other cultures where the mother's last name is the one that gets given to children. In still other places like China, Japan and parts of India, your family name actually comes first. So for me I'm Jane Lindholm but in some countries I would be called Lindholm Jane.

Now some countries have laws about how family names are passed down. In the United States, your parents get to decide your last name and actually it can be anything they want. Some families follow those traditions I mentioned a minute ago, some families have two last names one for each parent and some families all share onelast name. Some give each kid a different name. Some families create a new last name altogether, that's unique just to their family. It all depends on who your family is and what you want to do.

To the question of why we can have the same name but not be related, there's lots of reasons for that. Some last names are just very common in the area you live in. Maybe your families were once related but you're so far removed in time that you're not close relatives anymore and you probably haven't even met each other. It's more likely though that your ancestors just picked the same name. Also many people when they first moved to the United States changed their name when they were filling out the paperwork to legally move here. For example my last name, Lindholm, should actually be Olsen. When my great grandfather immigrated to the United States from Sweden his last name was Olsen. The traditional way last names are handed down in Scandinavian countries like Sweden and Norway and in Iceland, is that your father's first name becomes your last name. So for example my dad's name is Karl. In traditional Swedish culture, my name would be Jane Karlsdotter and my brother would be David Karlson. My great grandfather thought he might have more luck getting a job if he sounded like he came from a wealthy family. So he used the name Lindholm on his official paperwork instead of Olsen and we've been Lindholms ever since.

There are lots of stories about how families got their last names when there were big groups of people immigrating to the US. Often the people in charge just changed the spelling or even the pronunciation of last names that were difficult for them to pronounce to make them easier in English.

Your family might have a story about that and there's also something else we should mention about last names in the United States. Back before the Civil War it was legal to own slaves. Do you know about slavery? That's when one person owns another person, legally-speaking. Many, many people in parts of Africa in the early days of the United States were captured and brought to the U.S. where they were bought and sold. I really hope that you'll learn more about this part of our history in your school and maybe we can actually talk about it in another episode. But the reason I'm mentioning it now is because in many cases slaves were stripped of their names and given names chosen by these slave owners and they were often given the same last name as the slave owning family.

When you think about what your name means to you it can connect you to your family and to your history and your culture. A name is important so it can be very sad for people who have lost knowledge of their original family names. Your adults are the ones who can best answer any questions you have about your particular last name or your first name, for that matter and where it comes from and they may have an interesting story to tell you.

But Why is produced by Melody Bodette and me, Jane Lindholm, at Vermont Public Radio. Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. We'll be back in two weeks. Until then, stay curious!