

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

Is It Ever Ok To Break A Rule?

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[Jane Lindholm] This is *But Why: A Podcast For Curious Kids* from Vermont Public Radio.

I'm Jane Lindholm. I host the program, and it's my job — and my friend Melody's job — to take all the great questions you send us and track down interesting people to help answer them.

Sometimes the best people to help answer your questions are other kids.

Today we're going to tackle an ethical question. If you're a longtime listener of this show, you may have heard me ask you for your thoughts on this question before.

[Finn] Hi, my name is Finn. I'm from Seattle, Washington and my age is 10, and my question is "Is it okay to do something you're told not to do and then never tell anybody?"

[Jane] We've talked about ethics in some of our other episodes, like the one about how we treat animals differently depending on where we're from and how we're raised. Basically, ethics is how you behave based on what you believe is right and wrong. You might hear Finn's question and think "Of course you shouldn't break a rule and do something you're not supposed to."

[Girl] It is not okay to do something that you're not supposed to do. It's not okay to break any rule. When you break a rule and don't tell anybody, it's not good.

[Boy] No, because it would be bad. No, that would be lying

[Boy #2] No.

[Adult in background] Why not?

[Boy #2] Because it usually just means you'll get in trouble.

[Boy #3] Because you'll get in big trouble.

[Boy #4] No, it's okay to do that.OK. It's okay to do that.

[Boy #3] No, because then you'll get in trouble

[Girl #2] No, because it's not good if you get in trouble.

[Boy #5] No, because you're sort of lying and not doing what the people asked you to.

[Jane] That was Gabby, Gabrielle, Juniper, Elliot, Corwin, Prudence, and Cleo. They all told us they think it's not okay to do something you're not supposed to and then not tell anyone. But we also heard from some of you who think "Well, maybe sometimes it is OK."

[Boy #6] It depends on what it is. Like, if you're told to stay in the house, but something happens and you have to leave. That's like a different thing. It's not okay to not tell anybody, but if you do have to leave or do something that your parents or somebody tells you not to do, then you should do- should tell somebody.

[Boy #7] Like, if it's a bad rule, like, you have to stay outside of the house or else something bad. That's a bad rule.

[Boy #8] Like no candy for the rest of your life.

[Girl #3] It depends how bad, like, what you're doing is. If it's like sneaking a piece of chocolate, then, I mean, I think you can do that. But if it's something really bad, then you shouldn't do it.

[Girl #4] It depends who told you. Like, if your parents told you, then you shouldn't do it. And, well, if you do it then you should tell them you did it. Or if it's like a mean person you met on the street, it's OK to do it. If, I mean, and it depends what it is because if it's a bad question you shouldn't do it either way. If like it's a bad thing. And if it's a good thing, like a good deed, you probably should do it and if you did, that then why wouldn't you tell anyone?

[Jane] That was Aurora, Alex, Emma, and Sylvie. We wanted to get some advice from some adults who think about these kinds of ethical questions all the time. So we asked our friends over at *Short and Curly* what they think. *Short and Curly* is another podcast for kids based in Australia, and the whole idea of the show is to talk about tough, ethical questions. So we asked the hosts what they thought about Finn's question. Let's hear Finn one more time.

[Finn] Is it okay to do something you were told not to do and never tell anybody?

[Carl Smith] Oh hey, Matt. Did you want to answer Finn's question?

[Matt Beard] Sure, but I'm a little bit nervous, so please don't share this with anyone.

[Carl] Including, like, the *But Why* podcast, for example?

[Matt] Especially the *But Why* podcast.

[Carl] Of course. I mean, we work on an ethics show for kids so we always make sure we're doing the right thing. We would never do anything wrong just for the sake of a story.

[Matt] Okay, great. So remind me what his question is.

[Carl] OK well, Finn from Seattle asks "Is it okay to do something that you were told not to do and then never tell anybody?" What do you reckon?

[Matt] Well thinking about it in terms of ethics—which is all about right and wrong, good and bad, and making sure that we're thinking those problems through really carefully—there's a couple of things that we want to ask. Firstly, it's going to depend on who told us not to do whatever it is they're telling us not to do. Are they just some random person? Or are they a person in a position of authority like a policeman or a teacher or a parent or something?

[Carl] Yeah, because like, if it's your friend or someone you love, then maybe it would be quite different than just some stranger on the street asking you not to do something.

[Matt] Yeah and it's going to depend as well on what they ask you to do. So if I tell you—even though I'm your friend—to stop breathing forever you're probably not going to listen to that because it's a ridiculous and unfair thing that I'm asking you to do. But I don't think that's what Finn's really asking. I think Finn's asking whether it's okay to do something that's a little bit sneaky so long as you don't get caught. And the answer to that is... probably not, Finn. I'm really sorry. The thing about ethics is that even when nobody's watching, even when there are no rules or there's no laws that can tell us what to do, our ideas about right and wrong and our ideas about good and bad, they're the things that we carry around with us in our back pocket, kind of like a compass that tells us where to go. And so even if there are no rules or even if we could get away with it we can't actually hide from ethics, because it's... it's with us all the time. So even if you didn't tell anyone, even if you didn't get caught, it still wouldn't be okay to do something that you knew was wrong.

[Carl] Great okay thanks Matt. I'm sure Finn will be really happy that you've helped him out.

[Matt] Hope that helped, Finn! Carl, I gotta run!

[Carl] Okay! Catch ya, Matt!

[Matt] Bye!

[Carl] Now, I'm sure he won't mind if I send this off to *But Why* podcast. I mean, I did say I wouldn't send it. I just... maybe I won't tell Matt. Great. I've obviously learned heaps this episode. Thanks so much, Finn!

[Jane] Okay back to our ethical dilemma. Remember, we're trying to figure out if it's ever okay to do something you're not supposed to do and then keep it a secret. And we're hearing from a lot of kids today who are thinking it through with us. For Piper and Elizabeth, it's not so much breaking the rule that's the big problem; it's the idea about keeping it a secret that has them concerned.

[Piper] Mostly the doing it and then not telling anybody about doing it.

[Elizabeth] Mostly what isn't the good thing about it?

[Piper] Well, if you don't tell someone, for you it might feel worse, because you might get a feeling where you feel... kind of... embarrassed, and then you don't tell anybody, and then it just sticks with you, for like, the rest of your life.

[Elizabeth] So I feel like you would just feel guilty and then that wouldn't be really good for you. And no one would know why you if you didn't tell anyone. No no one would really know.

[Jane] And Camille and Maddie gave this idea some thought and decided there are times when it's necessary to keep a secret.

[Camille] If you're protecting somebody or keeping a surprise.

[Maddie] Maybe if you were if like your parents told you to always tell them the truth. And like if somebody were to tell you a secret about something that happened to them that wasn't good to tell them. And like your friend told you a secret and told you never tell anybody you could keep that secret for them.

[Camille] If it's something that's not dangerous and something that maybe that they had to do or did it for a good reason.

[Jane] I want to jump in here and tell you a little bit about what I think about this question. There are times when it's OK and times when it's not. If we look back in history we can find people who did things they were not supposed to do. In fact sometimes things they were explicitly told not to do, but they did them anyway and then kept it a secret. Let me give you an example. In the 1930s and 40s, there was a big conflict that involved a lot of different countries, including the United States, called World War II. European Jews were being killed because of their religion, and other minority groups were also being killed. But during that time, there were other people who helped them at great risk to themselves. They sometimes hid families or helped them escape or did other things to try to protect them. These helpers had been told not to do that, but they did it anyway because they believed it was right. And they kept their actions a secret in order to protect the people they were helping and to protect themselves. Another example is in the United States in the 1800's, when people who believed that slavery is wrong helped slaves run away and get to someplace where they could be safer. They had to keep their actions secret too. It's never okay to hurt somebody or treat them badly because of their race, their religion, who they love, what they look like. So in cases like that, I think you could say that breaking the rules is the right thing to do. It is ethical, and not telling someone is also the right thing. But here's the tricky part. You have to know what is right and what is wrong before you can make a decision like that. Part of the job of being a kid is learning what's right and what's wrong. And part of the job of being an adult is helping younger people learn those things. So if you have parents who are good people—who you can trust—you should listen to them. It's their job to help guide you to understand what's right and what's wrong. If you have teachers you trust, foster parents, grandparents, mentors, people in your church, coaches. If you have adults who you really trust, let them help you learn and understand what's moral, what's ethical. There are times, though, when an adult could tell you to do something that makes you uncomfortable. If that ever happens, it's your job to find a different adult who you trust and tell them. Don't keep that a secret, even if an adult has told you to. You should find an adult who you absolutely trust and be able to confide in them. To confide in someone is to tell them a secret. There's one other thing that I think is worth mentioning. Sometimes we do things that we really shouldn't, and then we don't want to come clean because we're afraid we'll get in trouble. Like one time when I was 6, I was eating my lunch at school, and my parents had packed me a sandwich that I thought tasted gross. So I threw it in the trash, but my teacher didn't want us to throw things in the trash. She wanted us to take what we didn't eat back home. I guess so our parents would know how well we ate. So she pulled my sandwich out of the rubbish and asked whose it was. She hadn't seen me throw it away. I stayed silent. I was embarrassed. She asked again, "Whose food is this?" I didn't answer. The teacher went through everyone's lunchbox to see if she could figure it out, and she made me and one other little girl stay in from recess because she couldn't prove whose lunchbox the sandwich came from. I cried the whole time. Now that I look back on it I'm not sure why my teacher was so determined to find out who left the little bit of food in the trash can. It doesn't seem like that big a deal. But I'm telling you this story because I felt so bad about lying that it made me miserable all night long, and I finally told my mother after I was supposed to have gone to bed. I thought

my mom was gonna get really mad at me. I almost didn't tell her. But she didn't get mad at me. She asked me why I had lied or why I hadn't come clean. and she asked why I was feeling so bad. And she helped me understand that I felt bad because I had done the wrong thing. And instead of getting mad at me, she had some really good ideas. She suggested that I write a letter to my teacher explaining the situation. I did and the next day I delivered it to my teacher at school. And you know what? I felt so much better. Sometimes hiding a secret is worse than getting punished for doing something bad. Here's another example of that.

[Delilah] Hi my name is Delilah, I'm six years old, and I live in Brooklyn. One time I went to the store, and then I robbed a My Little Pony toy. I felt really bad about it and then when I got in the car, I told my dad, and he said they had to go back and give it back, and I didn't want to because it's my favorite show. So I don't think, when, like... When you do something and nobody told you to do it then I think you should not. I think you should say it to somebody, but your mom and dad.

[Jane] Thanks for being brave and sharing that story, Delilah. Now Delilah did something she knew was wrong and she told her parents the truth and they were able to help her make it right so she didn't have to go on feeling guilty or get in trouble. The adults in your life are there to help you. I hope you feel like you can trust them. And thank you so much, Finn, for giving us all this to think about with your ethical question. We do have one other question we want to talk about today.

[Caleb] Hi my name is Caleb, and I'm eight years old. I live in Amherst Mass. And my question is "Why do people make really bad choices and want other people's lives to be harder?"

[Jane] Oh Caleb, that is such a hard question. If that's something you're experiencing in your life. I first want to tell you that I'm really sorry you're going through that, that someone else's choices have made you sad and made your life harder. The truth is that most people don't want other people's lives to be harder. Often they're thinking more about themselves than about others. You've probably had times in your life where you were tempted to make a bad choice. It's really hard sometimes to do the right thing, and sometimes it's hard to think about how it's going to affect people other than you. It might help to try to have some empathy, to put yourself in someone else's shoes. Sometimes that makes it a little bit clearer why that person might have made a bad decision, why they thought it was the right one, or why they struggled to do what's right. It will also help you to make good decisions yourself, ones that are both good for you and good for the people you love, because you might be able to imagine how they're going to feel about what you do. The truth is we can't control how other people act. We can only control our own actions. And again, I know I say this a lot, but find an adult you can trust and talk to them about this. Caleb thank you for sending that question. That's it for today. But Why's theme music is by Luke Reynolds.

The show is produced by Melody Bodette and me, Jane Lindholm, at Vermont Public Radio. If you have a question for us. Have an adult record it. You can use a smartphone. Maybe the memo function and then send the file to questions@butwhykids.org.

Tell us your first name, how old you are, and where you live and what your question is. We listen to every question and love them and we answer as many as we can.

We'll be back in two weeks. Until then stay curious.