But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

Why Are Boys Boys And Girls Girls?

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Jane: This is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids from Vermont Public Radio. I'm Jane Lindholm. On this podcast, we take questions from curious kids just like you all over the world and we find answers. This week, we're answering questions about boys and girls.

Simon: Hello, my name is Simon and I come from Washington, DC, and my question is, “why are boys and girls boys and girls?”

Jane: We're going to be talking in this episode about male and female bodies and ideas about gender. Adults listening, we think the whole family will enjoy this episode, but you're always free to give our episodes a listen first to see if it's right before playing it for your young ones. We brought your questions about boys and girls and gender and biological sex to this researcher.

Catesby: I am Anna Catesby Yant and I have a PhD in Anthropology from Vanderbilt University. And so what that means is I am really fascinated by why people do the things they do. And I want to know everything about why they do what they do. Why do they believe what they believe? Why do they buy what they buy? Why do they dress like they dress? And so I've always been fascinated by those kinds of questions.

Jane: Now, here's Simon's question again:

Simon: “Why are boys and girls boys and girls?”

Catesby: That is a fabulous and very complicated question, Simon. As an anthropologist, we tend to think about gender in two different ways. So a lot of times people think that gender is just one thing. As an anthropologist, we separate it out into biology and culture. So biology is the easiest thing to talk about because it is basically boys and girls are born with different kinds of genitalia. And so boys have penises and girls have vaginas. And so if you’re talking about biology, that’s what makes a boy a boy and a girl a girl.

Jane: So when it comes to your biological sex, whether you're a male person or a female person, that's generally determined by whether you have a penis or a vulva and other things like your hormones in your internal reproductive organs. Before babies are born, as they're developing inside a womb, their bodies grow more male or more female, depending on whether the sperm is carrying male DNA or female DNA. Gender is a little bit different. Gender is
something you feel intuitively. That means you don't have to explain it. It's just something that you feel and you decide for yourself. For most people, the sex they are born with and the gender they feel like are the same. So most people born with a penis feel like and know they're a boy. And most people born with a vulva feel or know they are a girl. But not all. Both biology and gender are more of a spectrum or even a rainbow than they are black and white. And some people feel like their gender and their sex don't line up. Now, if you have questions about that, you should talk to someone you trust. It's good to talk about the things that confuse us or trouble us, or maybe just that we don't totally understand about ourselves or about other people. But let's go a little bit deeper into gender, because when we think about boys and girls, we often think about things that we believe as a society make boys, boys and girls, girls. And I think that's kind of what Simon is getting out with his question. That has a lot to do with the lessons we learn without even knowing it from the world around us. So the way boys or girls are expected to dress or the toys we think of as boy toys versus girl toys or girl colors versus boy colors, those are not things that have to do with your biological sex, really. They're things our parents and friends learned from their parents and friends who learned them from their parents and friends. And these things do change slowly through time. Here's Catesby again.

[Catesby] So a lot of times when we think about boys and girls, we think about what anthropologists called gender. And that means the way a culture, so your society, the place you live, the people you live around, it's how they think about what makes a man a man and what makes a woman a woman. And these kinds of things change so it can be non-biological. So we think about whether people have long hair, the colors of clothing they wear. Why boys wear pants and girls wear skirts. More on the kind of toys that people play with, the kind of jobs people perform. So all of that is a cultural part of gender. And so biology does not often change the culture part.

[Jane] Can you give me some examples of how maybe American culture has changed when it comes to those gender roles?

[Catesby] Yes, that is a fascinating question. One of the easiest ways to kind of explore that is in jobs. And so traditionally, men and women performed very different jobs in society. And so men have often been in the very early period of the 19th and 20th century, men were teachers. Over time, when men went to war, women started to take those roles. And then when the men came back from war, women had started to taking up most of the teaching roles. And so it kind of transitioned that. Now teaching is a fairly feminine dominated profession. The same is true with nursing. So it used to be that males tended to be both nurses and doctors. And then over time we see females kind of move into the nursing profession in a much stronger way.
Those are interesting examples and they show us that what we think of as girl things or boy things do change over time. They're not innate, not based on something biological, they're more based on what we collectively have decided are the appropriate roles for men and women or boys and girls. At one time, pink was a boy's color, but now often people think of it as a girl color. Now let me make something really clear. I'm not saying that pink is a girl color or that boys should be mechanics and girls should be teachers. In fact, I think our society's starting to change. So the rules don't feel so strict, so rigid and fixed, so determined by gender. But you might not even notice that you yourself have ideas about what things are okay for a boy to do, but not a girl or vise versa. We have all kinds of expectations about these things based on where we live and what our families and schools and communities are like. But having an awareness of gender stereotypes can help you not fall into them. And it can help you understand that whatever it is you want to do or be or dress like or feel is fine. You are uniquely you, and that is fabulous. Before we come back to some of these really complex questions about gender and stereotypes, let's tackle some of the questions you have sent us about biological differences between boys and girls. Our friend Dr. Lori Racha from UVM Medical Center helped us with some of these questions. You might remember her from our previous two episodes about our weird and wonderful bodies.

Here's a question from Ruby

I live in Charleston, South Carolina. I'm five years old. My question is, “Why are boys taller than girls?”

Why are boys taller than girls?

Boys are slightly bigger at birth than girls on average. But then boys and girls tend to grow at a pretty even rate until they reach adolescence. In the first year of life, kids can grow about 10 inches, which is faster than at any other time in our lives. By age 2, height usually becomes fairly steady with a rate of about two and a half inches or six centimeters a year until adolescence. During adolescence, this is a time when kids enter something called puberty. Puberty is the change when you go from a young child's body to an adult body. For girls, this usually starts between the ages of 8 and 13. And for boys, usually between 9 and 14. And the growth spurt is usually about two years, two to five years in duration. Now girls enter puberty earlier than boys and so they often will have their adolescent growth spurt where they gain much faster their height earlier than boys do. Usually girls are done with their growth by about age fifteen. However, boys continue to grow at that fairly steady rate until they reach puberty and then they have their growth spurt too. So because they start a little bit later than girls, they've often gotten
a little bit taller before they've gotten their growth spurt. So they ultimately are usually taller than girls on average when they complete.

[Jane] Bear in mind what Dr. Racha is talking about is the average. That means that if you look at all the men in the world and all the women in the world, men will be slightly taller than women. But if you look person to person, you can find so many examples of women who are taller than men and men who are shorter than women. In fact, how tall you will be has less to do with being a man or a woman. And more to do with which country you live in and how tall or short your biological family members are. Now, Dr. Racha has some advice for growing up big and strong.

[Lori] To grow your best, I always like to remind kids that you can eat healthy foods, get plenty of sleep and get your hour a day of exercise. Those things help us grow our best. Some of your growth is based on your genetics. So the heights of your biologic parents. But you can do your part by getting good sleep, eating well and exercising.

[Jane] Adam has a question about Adam's apples.

[Adam] I'm five years old. I live in Orange County, California. And my question is, “Why do boys only have Adam apples?”

[Lori] Well, Adam, I have an interesting thing to tell you. Girls have Adam's apples too. The Adam's Apple is the lyrics or voicebox. And they're very similar in boys and girls until they enter puberty. Again, puberty is that part of time when your body changes from a young child's body to an adult body. During puberty, the larynx grows in both boys and girls. However, the boys have more change than the girls, meaning it grows more. This allows their voices to be, on average, deeper.

And while they're growing, it's kind of fun because the voice can be squeaky and go up and down kind of unpredictably before it fully is developed and becomes a stable voice.

So because it's bigger in boys, it sticks out more. And that's why it's referred to as the Adam's apple.

[Jane] Many of you had questions about facial hair.

[Zela] Hi, my name is Zela and I'm six years old and I'm from Middlesex, Vermont. And my question is, “Why do men go beards?”

[Nora] My name is Nora, I live in Gibson City, Illinois, I'm six years old. And my question is, “Why can't women grow beards?”
[Tao] My name is Tao. I live in West Lafayette, Indiana. And my question is, “Why can't girls grow beards?”

[Lori] So, again, let's start back at the beginning. When we're first born, babies are often covered with a fine hair, villas hair all over our body that falls out. Boys and girls, while we're young, tend to have not a lot of body hair. In general, it's pretty even between boys and girls. However, when boys and girls enter puberty and we keep mentioning puberty that time of life, when you go from a young child's body to an adult body, that usually starts between the ages of 8 and 14, bodies make a lot of changes. There are hormones, or chemical messages that circulate throughout the body, and give instructions on how to make changes. One type of these hormones are called androgens and they encourage hair growth. Some are the same for boys and girls. Boys and girls tend to produce more hair on their legs and in their underarm area. However, boys have more androgens than girls do. So they get more messages sent to other places in their body, too, including their chest and also their face. And so that's where they can develop mustaches and beards, which I think is always fun for a boy to really be able to change their appearance by having mustaches or not or having beards or not. A fun fact about facial hair for men is that if a human now never cut their beard, it's thought that it could grow to be over 30 feet in length. That would be pretty impressive.

[Jane] That would be an impressive beard. Now, speaking of hair.

[Hawkin] Hi, my name is Hawkin from Minneapolis, Minnesota. And I am wondering why girls typically have longer hair than boys and why not boys grow hair that long?

[Evan] Hi, my name is Evan I live in Cumberland, Rhode Island. And my question is, “Why most girls have long hair like Ariel. Not too long. And why do most boys have short hair?”

[Jane] Most women would have a hard time growing a very long beard. But both men and women can grow long hair on top of their heads. So why is it that women often have longer hair? And men often have shorter hair? Let's go back to Catesby Yant, because the answer to this question has to do with what we have decided are the ways that boys typically behave and girls typically behave or look. It's a choice based on all kinds of societal norms and our own personal identities. My hair, for example, is very short right now, but I am both biologically a girl and in terms of my gender. I'm a woman or a girl, so I'm a girl, but I have short hair and that doesn't make me less of a girl. Here's Catesby.
So this is where my archaeologist self comes in and I went way, way, way back in history to look at this. And so from the beginning of time, so way back to the ancient Egyptians, the Romans, the Greeks, all of the cultures that we have pictures of, women almost always have longer hair than men. So there are definitely times in cultures where men also usually had long hair. But women's is almost always a little bit longer. And there are a couple of different explanations for that. So one is that to have long hair means you have to be a healthy person. So if you have long, pretty healthy hair, that means you're eating well, you're exercising you're well-rested, you're nourished, you don't have any kind of disease. So in ancient times, healthy hair was actually basically a symbol of a person being healthy. The other kind of cool part is that hair is a status symbol. And so what that means is a status symbol is something that you can wear, something you do that tells a lot about who you are as a person, whether you are an important person or maybe not so important, maybe what religious group you belong to. Even the part of the country that you're from, all of those things we kind of mark with status symbols that can be anything from clothing to jewelry to hairstyles. And so a long time ago, if anybody out there has long hair and you have ever tried to exercise or do anything active, you know that that long hair is going to get in your way if you don't put it up or do something with it. And so a long time ago, having long hair was a status symbol because that meant that you did not have to work a lot, that you were not doing manual labor. And so over time, long hair in a really elaborate, so very fancy hairdos, became the symbol of kind of elite or wealthy or very important people.

What about now? I mean, I know a lot of boys with long hair now.

Yes. And so that goes back to that idea that in American culture especially, we're starting to see gender rules, so what makes boys boys and what makes girls girls, culturally change. And it also, if you go back and look at paintings throughout history, you see there are lots of different periods of time where men had long hair.

So back in the around 1000 A.D., there was actually a whole group of Gothic warriors called the capillati, which meant long haired men. So we see this idea of long hair associated with really powerful male warriors. Back in England, you know, the aristocracy men often wore powdered wigs to give them longer hair. So it really is just a very short period of history in America where men only had short hair. And so I think that's just changing.

Our culture is changing. Boys right now do have a choice often in whether their hair is long or short. But as a kid yourself, you may find that whether or not your hair is long or short has a lot to do with your parent's choices. If you want your hair longer or shorter, now might be a good time to
ask them if you can make a change. Coming up, we'll talk more about boys and girls.

This is But Why? I'm Jane Lindholm, and today on the show, we're answering your questions about boys and girls and what makes a boy, a boy and a girl, a girl. It's a complex thing to explain because we're talking about both our biology and our culture when it comes to how we think about the way girls and boys are different or the same. We're talking with an anthropologist named Catesby Yant who's helping us understand some of the cultural factors that go into this. You mentioned that there are two ways to think about boys and girls or, you know, gender and sex. And so one way is to think biologically. So what body parts do you have? And the other way is to think about this as culturally, you know, that boys do certain things and girls do certain things and you feel aligned or not with what your biology is. And in American culture and Western culture, we often think of men and women or boys and girls. Is that true everywhere in the world? Does everywhere in the world think of these two different genders that sort of divide up along lines.

[Catesby] No.

And that's where anthropology becomes really fascinating. So most Western cultures, so America and lots of other countries in Europe, do tend to think about males and females as the only two categories. It's actually pretty common in non-Western cultures and in ancient and historical cultures to have what they call a third gender. And so this is a recognized gender. So it's not something that people wouldn't know about. It's not kind of a secret. It's something that everybody in that group of people, that society, would know in. What usually happens is it is a biological male performing the cultural role of a female or a biological female performing the cultural role of a male.

[Jane] That might be confusing. What do you mean by that?

[Catesby] Well, so as I was saying earlier, a lot of times in America, we think that a biological boy is going to be a gendered boy. So there's all of those kind of non-biological things like a boy is going to have short hair, he's going to wear dark colors, he's going to play with trucks and with swords. And that's that cultural part that we tie to his biology.

[Jane] So we think his body parts are male. Therefore, he's going to behave like what our idea of a boy is.

[Catesby] Exactly. And the same is true for females, that if you were a biological female, then in America, we would expect you to want to play with dolls and maybe like dresses and have long hair and wear makeup. And that's not true for some other cultures. So there are cultures where a
biological boy might be at home doing the cleaning and the cooking and taking care of the children. Whereas in America, those are typically female roles. And so there are certain cultures around the world who have this third gender, which is something that just doesn't match up with how we think about gender and biological sex in America.

Jane You know, when you say, too, that there are ideas of what a girl should be or what we think of as a girl and what we think of as a boy, that doesn't sound fair to me, because what if I'm a girl and I like wearing dresses and playing with trucks or I want to be a racecar driver and I want to wear makeup?

Catesby That has in the past been very strictly defined. And I honestly think that's one of the coolest things about where we live now, is that those rules are starting to break. And so more and more and more we see that it doesn't matter whether you are a biological boy or girl, that you can do anything you want to. And all of those behaviors in those jobs, in those attitudes that in the past have only been for boys, or only been for girls, are starting to go either way. So it's much more up to a girl or a boy to define what they want to do and how they want to do it.

Jane Here's a question from Travis.

Travis I am 7 years old. My question is, “Why does girls wear makeup and boys does not?”

Jane Why does makeup often seem like a girl thing?

Catesby And that is also a really interesting question. And as an anthropologist, an archaeologist, if we go back in history, we see that for a long, long time, men also wore makeup or used facial products. They use different kinds of products as women. So they weren't maybe necessarily, you know, they weren't wearing heavy eye makeup or lipstick, perhaps. But all the way back to ancient Egypt, men used eyeliner. They would use rouge. And so throughout history, we do see men using facial products. And again, it's really neat because it's in America in, you know, the last two or three hundred years that men kind of stopped using facial products. And now the men's grooming products is one of the fastest growing market segments. So men are increasingly starting to use products like moisturizers and things beyond just shaving.

Jane There are a lot of men who are makeup artists. They get paid to put makeup on other people. Some men wear makeup for their jobs, especially if they are on TV or if they're actors on the stage. And some men wear makeup
because they like the way it looks. Another place in our culture where you may have seen the difference in the way men and women are treated is in sports. Here's a question from Max.

[Max] I am eight years old and I live in Brookline, Massachusetts. And my question is, “Why is there an all men's team or an all women's team in professional sports?”

[Jane] Why would there be an, in professional sports or even in team sports, in schools, why is there an all men's team or an all women's team?

[Catesby] That is also a complicated question. I think most of it would be due to the biological differences between men and women or boys and girls. So if you remember back at the beginning, we said that boys are boys biologically because they have certain kinds of genitalia. But also because their bodies produce different amounts of hormones. And so after puberty, those hormones tend to make men bigger, stronger. They have more upper body strength. And so they're just better at certain tasks than women in general. And so I know there's been a big discussion in sports about mixing men and women and different kinds of teams. And a lot of it gets into the equity of that, which means that if you had women and men together in certain sports or in certain instances, it would be a lot harder to kind of have a level or a fair playing field because men just tend to be better at certain things than women because of their body build.

[Jane] That doesn't mean that men are better than women in all sports, just that there are concerns that in some sports, men's upper body strength, for example, would give them an advantage over women if they were competing together. There are also some sports where women would have an unfair advantage and some sports where men and women are equally matched. In fact, there are some sports where men and women compete together. Figure skating, curling, swimming, tennis and track are just a few where there are at least some events that combine men and women into the same competition. Sometimes sports officials keep women's and men's team separate for no good reason at all, except that that's always how it's been. But that, too, is slowly changing. Judah had a question about an advantage that some girls have.

[Judah] I'm seven and three quarters old. I live in Arkansas. My question is, “Why can more girls do the splits than boys?”

[00:26:16][Jane] We gave that question to Dr. Racha.

[Lori] I have a couple of different answers for this question, Judah. First of all, if we look at boys and girls and compare them in different scores of flexibility,
balance, aerobics, fitness, strength, speed and agility, we do notice there are some differences. Girls tend to score higher in flexibility and balance as compared to boys. On the other hand, boys tend to be a little bit better at aerobic fitness, strength and speed and agility.

[Jane] But why do those differences exist?

[Lori] I'm not sure I can give a great answer for why those differences exist in young children, but it probably has to do about how our bodies are built. Another reasonable approach to this question would be to look at practice. In general, there are more girls who participate in sports that focus on flexibility than boys. For example, sports such as ballet and gymnastics have a lot of attention paid to flexibility and balance. And there might be more boys who are in aerobic fitness sports, or sports that promote speed, agility and strength. However, I like to focus on those things in our environment that we can change. And certainly boys can improve their flexibility and balance by doing sports that promote those things or stretching or practicing doing splits. And there certainly are boys that can do those things very well. If we watch the Olympics and men's gymnastics, we see very flexible men who are able to do splits and amazing feats. Also, I'd like to remind the girls that you can improve your aerobic fitness, strength, speed and agility by doing sports that enhance those skills. Things like soccer and track and other field sports are all great ways of working on improving your strength, speed and aerobic fitness.

[Jane] Here's our last question for this episode.

[Sadbh] Hi, my name is Sadbh and I'm twelve years old and I'm from Ireland. So my question is, “Why didn't females have as many rights as males in the olden days?” Like, why weren't they allowed to vote or go to school or anything? And Emma Watson inspired me to ask this question.

[Catesby] So that one is hard to answer, because we don't really know why society happened like it did. So a long time ago, since as an archaeologist, we can go way, way, way, way, way, way, way back thousands of years to the very first written code of law, which was from Mesopotamia. And even way back then, it seems like men were in charge. And what has happened is throughout time, men have just kind of stayed in charge of everything. And over time, if you want to keep power, you've got to make sure other people don't have it. And so until recently, not letting women vote and not letting women have as many rights as men was a way to kind of keep power with men. And that started changing in the eighteen hundreds, especially because women started to say, hey, that's not fair. And so that's when we really start to see the suffragette movement. So which meant it was a movement in England and the United States where women got the right to vote. And that's
where we start to see all these ideas that we know that we have today in America about women being able to be NASCAR drivers, to be sportscasters, and to do all of these things that men used to do all the time.

[Jane] Today, do you think it's equal for men and women and boys and girls?

[Catesby] I do not think it is. I think it's becoming more equal and more equitable. But I do think that society and culture is very slow to change. And so I think that if you go back even to the 1920s, women today have significantly more rights. And there are lots of studies that women still get paid 80 cents for every dollar that a man does. So there is not an equitable pay scale in most companies in the United States. And there are different, different issues that women have in society because of their biology that make it hard to have kind of a level playing field.

[Jane] What about around the world? I mean, we've been talking a lot about Western culture and particularly American culture. But there are a lot of different rules and a lot of different ways around the world that people set up their culture.

[Catesby] Yes. Around the world and especially in non-Western cultures. So in places that are not in Europe. So not England, not Italy, not Spain, not the United States. Men and women are treated very, very differently. And part of it just goes back to history. And it's just how things have always been done. But most of the rest of the world tends to have fairly traditional gender roles. So that idea that men do certain things and women do certain things. And it's very specific.

[Jane] Is there anything else as we're thinking about these ideas of boys and girls and what makes us who we are, that you think would be helpful for us to keep in mind?

[Catesby] I think that is one of the most exciting things about where we are in time now is that it's not strict. So boys can do not boys things and girls can do not girl things. And I think it's important that we follow what we like and what we're good at and not necessarily think about whether a boy is supposed to do baking or a girl is supposed to be in a football journalism school. And so I think it's really important to remember to not limit yourself based on just some kind of old idea.

[Jane] As kids, you will get to shape the world as you grow up and maybe you'll be able to make some of those changes to make our world a more equitable, or fair place, for women and men. But whatever you choose, we
hope you don't let ideas about what a boy should do or a girl should do get in your way of doing the things that you want to do. You get to do whatever you want to do, regardless of whether you feel like a boy or you feel like a girl or you feel like both or neither. You are you, and whoever you are is great.

That's it for this episode. If you have a question about anything have an adult recorded, it's easy to do on a smartphone. Tell us your name, your age and where you live.

And then send your question to questions@butwhykids.org. We will do our best to get an answer for you and we promise, no matter what, we will listen to your question and I guarantee we will enjoy it. 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 with a whole new episode. Until then, stay curious.