

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

"Do Skunks Like Their Own Smell?" And Other Stumpers!

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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. And we find answers.

Usually we answer questions that are all about the same topic in one episode.

But today we're answering 10 questions that have nothing in common other than being kind of a stumper, the kind of question that the adult you ask might say.

Hmm. That's a good question.

[Child 1] Why do shoes get stinky?

[Child 2] How come we don't suffocate in cars when they're driving?

[Child 3] Where does the sidewalk end?

[Jane] Those are three of the 10 questions we're going to answer in this episode. So let's dive right in. Here's our first good question.

[Chianshin] Hi, my name is Chianshin, I'm 7 years old. And I live in Melbourne, California. My question is, do skunks like the smell of themselves?

[Jane] That's a good question. And we found just the right person to answer it. Mary Holland is a naturalist and she was actually the very first guest on.

[Jane] *But Why* more than three years ago.

[Mary Holland] Do skunks like the smell of themselves? As often as I've encountered skunks and even been sprayed by one, it has never occurred to me to wonder how the smell affects the skunk. I've always been more concerned with how it affects me. According to Dr. Jerry Dragoo, an expert on skunks and head of the Dragoo Institute for the Betterment of Skunks and Skunk Reputation, skunks, do not enjoy the smell of their own spray or the spray of other skunks. Skunks rarely spray each other or other animals. They only have a certain amount of spray inside them. And once it is all used up, they must go several days without it while their body manufactures more. During this time they are defenseless, so they only spray another animal if they are seriously threatened.

[Jane] So if you don't want to get sprayed, Mary says it's best not to scare a skunk. They don't want to spray you.

[Mary Holland] Prior to spraying a skunk will give ample warning to its enemy by stamping its front feet. If this is ignored, then the skunk will spray as a last defense. When skunks spray, they rarely get any on themselves, though they can tolerate their own smell. They do not appreciate getting hit in the face and eyes from another skunk. A skunk's sense of

smell is even stronger than a human's. So, if anything, the skunk suffers more than anyone who has had the misfortune of being sprayed. If a skunk doesn't counter the spray of another skunk, it will rub its face in the dirt, sneeze or try to groom itself to get rid of the spray's odor.

[Jane] Thanks for the question, Chianshin. Here's another question about an animal.

[Calla] Hi, my name is Calla. I live in Chicago, Illinois. I'm four and a half years old and I wanted to know if monkeys ever touch the ground or do they always just keep swinging? Bye.

[Jane] Do monkeys ever touch the ground? Or do they just keep swinging?

[Sophia Carrera] Hi, Calla. I'm Sophia Carrera, a PhD candidate at the University of Michigan, and I study monkey behavior. This is a great question. Monkeys are a type of primate, and there are lots of different kinds that live all over the world. Monkeys that live in South and Central America spend almost their whole lives in the trees. They swing on the branches, eat leaves and fruit, and even sleep in trees. But sometimes they do come down to the jungle floor, usually to drink water. Other monkeys live in Asia and Africa. Most of these monkeys spend their time both in the trees and on the ground. They switch really easily, but there are some monkeys that only live on the ground, like the monkey that I study in Ethiopia, geladas. Other primates stay on the ground too. Like us. Humans are primates, but we're not monkeys, we're apes. We might climb trees, but we don't live in them. And some other apes, like gorillas, almost never go in trees because they're too big and heavy. Thanks for such a great question, Carla. Primates are so much fun to learn about, and I hope you keep wondering about them and their behaviors.

[Amelie] Hi, my name is Amelie and I'm from Florida and I am 6 years old. And I wanna know why fish live in water, and when it thunders and lightnings, they don't get a struck.

[Jane] You've probably heard someone tell you not to swim during a thunderstorm so you don't get struck by lightning. So, Amelie is asking, why don't fish get electrocuted during lightning storms? Good question. The National Weather Service says that before a lightning strike, an electrical charge builds up along the water's surface. When lightning strikes, the electricity discharges mostly near the water's surface, the top of the water where it meets the air. That's because water is a good conductor of electricity. But the electricity moves over the surface of the water rather than down into the bottom of it. Fish are usually swimming deeper below the surface, and so they aren't likely to be hit. But if they are near the surface, they actually can be killed by lightning. So, remember, it really isn't safe for you to swim or be in a boat during a lightning storm. We're on to question number four and I'm going to get in my car for this one.

[Elizabeth] Hi, my name's Elizabeth. And I'm 10 years old and I'm from Attleboro, Massachusetts. My question is, how come we don't suffocate in cars when they're driving?

[Jane] Good question, Elizabeth. I'm in my car now, and I can look around and, you know, kind of feels like a little bubble when you're inside a car, right? You stay dry in a rainstorm and warm in the middle of winter or even cool on a hot day with the air conditioning. But cars aren't sealed off like a bubble or even like a plane. They have vents that let in air from outside the car. In fact, the heating and cooling system for the car needs that air coming in from outside in order to work properly. That's why even with your windows closed, you can still smell stinky things like a smelly vehicle in front of you, or a tractor with a full manure

spreader if you're here in Vermont, or maybe like the skunk spray we talked about earlier in the episode. Because all of that air is coming in, you have plenty of oxygen to breathe in a car when you're driving. There's plenty of air when you're parked, too, by the way. But it's not a great idea to hang out or play in a parked car with the windows up because it gets dangerously hot very quickly. Here's question number five.

[Silas] My name is Silas, I live in Barss Corner, Nova Scotia. I'm 6 years old. And my question is tow trucks are child emergency vehicles. But why don't they have sounds like fire trucks, police cars, and ambulances, which are also emergency vehicles?

[Jane] Melody found a few people to help answer your good question, Silas.

[Dan Goodman] Dan Goodman, public affairs manager for Triple AAA, Portland, Maine.

[Jason Akers] My name is Jason Akers, and I own the Auto Clinic and the Auto Towing and Recovery.

[Melody] And how long have you been driving tow trucks?

[Jason] I started driving tow trucks when I was about 19. So, that's 20 years.

[Melody] What made you want to do that?

[Jason Akers] It's fun. We'd like to help people. I mean, helping people is the most rewarding part of it. And it's it's a fun living, you know, it's good time.

[Jane] Okay. What about those tow trucks?

[Dan Goodman] Yeah. So great question by Silas. And the laws on sirens, on different emergency vehicles is a state by state issue. So right now we're sitting in a parking lot in Montpelier, Vermont. And Vermont's law is that tow truck drivers cannot have sirens on their vehicle. They can only have amber lights, it's a gold-colored light. The only vehicles that are permitted to have sirens are law enforcement, like police cars, ambulances and fire trucks.

[Melody] Do you know if there's any states where tow trucks can have sirens? So, I know of at least of two states that do permit tow trucks to have sirens. And that's Missouri and Idaho.

[Jane] In the United States whether or not tow trucks can have sirens is state law. So, it's different from one state to another. But in most places, they can't have sirens. In Canada the rules about lights and sirens are set by the provinces, kind of like the way it is in the United States. So, it also depends on where you go. But again, most provinces don't allow tow trucks to have sirens, but tow trucks are allowed to have bright flashing or rotating lights. Often, it's that yellow-orange color. But in some places, it's red or blue. Most states and provinces do have a law though that drivers have to slow down and move over to give space. So, when you see a tow truck helping a vehicle, move over and give them some room.

[Jane] Here's Dan again.

[Dan Goodman] Yeah. So it's a law in all 50 states to slow down and move over for any emergency vehicle that includes tow truck, department of transportation vehicles, law enforcement, fire, EMS.

[Melody] Do you think that tow truck should have sirens?

[Jason Akers] There are times where sirens would be nice because people do recognize sirens. And when they hear them, they, they know to move over. There are instances where, you know, say like on the interstate where both lanes are blocked and we need to get to the scene to clear the scene, to open up the highway. And yes, sirens would be handy. A lot of times what we'll do is we'll ask for a police escort through so that that pretty much solves that. But sometimes that's not an option. So, yeah, they could be very handy.

[Jane] By the way, Jason, he's the towing company owner, says some of the coolest tow trucks are in Canada.

[Jason Akers] They have a lot of nice tow trucks in Canada. Some of the best-looking tow trucks are actually built in Canada.

[Jane] Coming up,

[Child] How do we know where our mouth is even though we aren't looking in a mirror?

[Child 2] Why are little brothers so annoying?

[Jane] This is *But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids?* I'm Jane Lindholm. Today, we're answering 10 of your really good questions. Here's number six.

[Juniper] Hi, my name is Junior. I'm seven years old. I live in Abington, Pennsylvania. And my question is, why can little brothers be so annoying? Because I have a little brother and he's really annoying.

[Max] Hi. My name is Max and I'm eight years old. And my question is, why are little brothers so annoying?

[Jane] We thought of the perfect person to answer this question.

[Lincoln] Hi, I'm Lincoln and I'm Max's little brother. Little brothers are so annoying because big brothers are annoying-er.

[Jane] Thanks for that, Lincoln. Here are some thoughts on this from a big brother.

[Walter] Hi, I'm Walter and I'm 5 from New York. My brother isn't annoying because he sometimes plays with me.

[Jane] See, it's not all so bad. Sometimes brothers and sisters and friends and cousins and parents are going to annoy you. Maybe you don't want to do what they want to do, or they're trying to get your attention by singing an annoying song or kicking your chair. In those cases, they might want to play with you, and you might want to do your own thing. You know, we're all still learning to get along. That's one of the things about younger siblings. They're still learning. So, give them time. And it's hard for us all to live together. Sometimes we get annoyed with one another, but we also get the good times. So you

want to remember that when your little sibling is being annoying, that they may be annoying now, but give it five minutes or tomorrow, you're going to really have a great time with them. Also, someday you're both gonna be adults and you're gonna be really glad to have your siblings around. Trust me on that. I have three siblings and I actually didn't find them very annoying when I was younger. But boy, am I glad to have them now. It's a treat.

[Amelia] My name is Amelia. And I'm 4 and a half years old. I'm from Virginia and my question is.

[Amelia] Why do shoes get stinky?

[00:12:57] [Jane] Why do shoes get stinky? Well, actually, it's not your shoes that stink. At least not originally. It's your feet in those shoes. Some shoes, because of the materials they're made of, just absorb that foot smell more than others, especially if you don't wear socks in your shoes. Now your feet can get smelly because your feet sweat, a lot. You have so many sweat glands in your feet. Sweat glands make the sweat, and your skin is full of tiny holes called pores. And they let out the sweat, which is water and salt when you're hot. Sweat is actually really good for you. It's the body's air conditioning. It keeps you from overheating. But all of that sweat in a closed-up shoe mixes with the bacteria on your skin, and that makes the stink. Another reason your shoes can get smelly has to do with something happening right now in our part of the world here in Vermont: mud and rain. Wet shoes are a great habitat for mildew. That's a type of mold that loves moist environments with plenty of bacteria to eat. So, if you don't want your sneakers to stink, don't walk through that mud puddle in your sneaks, put on your rain boots and then go back out and splash around. Here's question number eight.

[Enian] Hello. My name is Enian and I am 5 years old and I live in Norfolk, Virginia.

[Enian] And my question is, how do we know where our mouth is even though we're not looking in the mirror?

[Lori] Hi, this is Dr. Lori Racha. I'm a pediatrician at the UVM Children's Hospital Pediatric Primary Care.

[Lori] There is a map of our bodies that's distributed over the surface of our brain. It's called the homunculus. There's a part of the brain that's dedicated to the head and arms and trunk and feet and all of that. And so that, in coordination with a part of the brain called the cerebellum, organizes the muscles that are needed to activate, to pick up the piece of food, move that in space and to put it into our mouths. So it works all together to coordinate how we get food to our mouths.

[Jane] Here's question number nine.

[Maggie] My name is Maggie. I'm six years old and they live in East Montpelier, Vermont. My question is, why do children's books have more boys than girls?

[Grace] Hi, Maggie. I'm Grace Lin. Children's book author and illustrator of many books like the middle grade novel *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* and the picture book *A Big Mooncake for Little Star*. So, Maggie, your question was, why do children's books have more boys than girls in them? That's a really good question and a really hard one to answer. There are many different ways to answer that, but I'm going to try it this way. So publishers are big companies that make books. They take the art and stories from people

like me, and they use their special machines to make hundreds and hundreds of copies so they can sell and make money. Publishers want to sell as many books as they can. And a long time ago, someone decided that boys would not read books about girls, *but* girls would read books about boys. So, publishers started making more books with boys in them because they believed that they could sell more of them. And that is why children's books have more boys than girls in them. And of course, this is not fair at all. By doing this, it makes it seem like girls' stories are not as important as boys' stories. And it also makes some boys feel like they shouldn't read books with girls in it. This is not good for anyone.

[Jane] Just because publishers believe that doesn't mean it's true. And you have the ability to help change things.

[Grace] One way we can all help to make things more equal is to make sure that you read and share books with female characters in them, with boys and girls. And always remember that there is no such thing as a boy book and there's no such thing as a girl book.

[Jane] I've come out to a special place to answer our 10th and final question for today. This one comes from Gabby, who's 5 and lives in Burlington, Vermont, not far from where we are.

[Gabby] Where does this sidewalk end?

[00:17:21] [Jane] Where does the sidewalk end? That question kind of makes us laugh here at *But Why* because Melody and I don't live in cities. We live out in the country where there really aren't a lot of sidewalks. In fact, I don't think my town has a single one. But there are some sidewalks near VPR's studio. And, as is all too common in Vermont, the sidewalks start and then they suddenly end. And then you have no place to walk. It could actually be hard to find a large stretch of sidewalk. But for those of you who live in big cities with endless seeming sidewalks, it's probably fun to think about the place where the city turns into the country and the sidewalk stops. In fact, if you look hard enough, you can probably find the literal spot where the sidewalk ends. By literal, I mean actual, the real place. But we're going to go now to the figurative, the imaginary place where the sidewalk ends. A very famous poet named Shel Silverstein imagined this place and wrote this.

"There is a place where the sidewalk ends
And before the street begins,
And there the grass grows soft and white,
And there the sun burns crimson bright,
And there the moon-bird rests from his flight
To cool in the peppermint wind.

Let us leave this place where the smoke blows black
And the dark street whines and bends.
Past the pits where the asphalt flowers grow
We shall walk with a walk that is measured and slow,
And watch where the chalk-white arrows go
To the place where the sidewalk ends.

Yes, we'll walk with a walk that is measured and slow,
And we'll go where the chalk-white arrows go
For the children, they mark and the children, they know

The place where the sidewalk ends.”

[Jane] That was “Where the Sidewalk Ends” by Shel Silverstein. And we're gonna let that be the end of our episode. What do you imagine the end of the sidewalk is like? Is there grass that grows soft and white? A moon-bird resting from flight? Or is there something different for you when you imagine the spot where the sidewalk ends and you go there inside your mind? You can tell us about it if you'd like. Send a note to questions@butwhykids.org.

That's also where you can send your questions about anything. Have an adult record you. You can do it on a smartphone. That's a nice, easy way to do it. Be sure to tell us your first name, where you live and how old you are, and then send the file to questions@butwhykids.org. We would love to hear from you. *But Why* is produced by Melody Bodette and me, Jane Lindholm at Vermont Public Radio. Both inside and outside the studio. Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. “Where the Sidewalk Ends” by Shel Silverstein is Copyright 1974, renewed in 2002 by Evil Eye LLC and was used with permission. And our thanks. We'll be back in two weeks with an all-new episode. Until then, stay curious.