

Seen and Not Heard with Jana Mohr Lone

Christiane Wisehart, host and producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart. And this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Coulis Coulis]

Christiane: Before [Jana Mohr Lone](#) became a philosopher, she was a lawyer who worked with families and children. She noticed that the legal system often robbed her clients of a voice. She watched with dismay as children were disempowered again and again. In her current practice as a philosopher, she's dedicated to using philosophy to help young people experience the power of their own voices.

Jana Mohr Lone: And I think that there's maybe no more powerful gift we can give to children than helping them to see their own perspectives as invaluable, as unable to be replaced by anyone else. And that what they see is worth articulating and that if there's a question that they have about something, it's not because there's something they don't know that they should. It's because there's something puzzling to wonder about and that they should be very comfortable sharing that.

Christiane: Stay tuned for our discussion on today's episode of Examining Ethics.

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Christiane: Ethics and philosophy tend to be subjects that people might encounter in a college class, or maybe at high school. There's a [dedicated group of educators](#) who are changing that by bringing philosophy into primary school classrooms across the nation. My guest today, the philosopher Jana Mohr Lone, is committed to this work, and she's here to discuss her new book on the topic, [Seen and Not Heard: Why Children's Voices Matter](#).

[interview begins]

Christiane: So you're a philosopher who works a lot with children. What brought you to this work?

Jana Mohr Lone: A number of things. Before I was a philosopher, I was a lawyer and I worked a lot with children and families on issues, primarily related to family violence and neglect and other issues that affected children and women primarily. And in my legal work, I started to get really frustrated at the limitations of a legal system in the sense that the law was able to come in and react to problems and try and solve them or help to solve them. But the law really isn't equipped to empower people to manage these problems themselves or to avoid having them. And in particular, I would observe how profoundly disempowered the children were, in the legal process and in general for many of them in their lives, at home and at school.

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And at the same time I was working on my master's in philosophy. So I was a practicing lawyer, but I loved philosophy and had been an undergraduate major in philosophy. And then I had started to have children. And so when my first son, I have three boys, when my first son was about age four, I was working on my dissertation and he was starting to ask questions that four year olds ask, why is there hate in the world? What is time? And I started to recognize these as philosophical questions because I was so immersed in philosophy and was, I think, had a heightened sensitivity to hearing the philosophical content of what my son was saying.

And I started to get really interested in the idea that children were already thinking philosophically without any formal training, because I started remembering as a child, I was asking the kinds of questions that my son was asking. Why do people have to die, was a big one for me and for him. And so I asked his pre-K teacher, if I could come in and have a little conversation with these four and five year olds, because one of the things I'd noticed is that Will, and my conversations often happen in the context of stories at night. So I'd be reading him a picture book and it would raise a question or a story that we would start to talk about. And those conversations often became quite philosophical. So I went into this pre-K class and I brought a "[Frog and Toad](#)" story because Arnold Lobel is one of my favorites.

And we ended up having this lovely 20 minute conversation about what it means to be brave. Can you be brave and afraid at the same time? Can you be brave if you aren't afraid because doesn't bravery involve doing something that's hard or that's scary to you, et cetera. And so that launched me. At the same time I read Gary Matthews' book, [The Philosophy of Childhood](#). And I started to realize that this might be the point that brought together my love for philosophy and my interest in the empowerment of children, because it seemed to me that in the conversations I was having with these children, that it created a space that was very unlike the spaces in which children ordinarily move in school. That is, that it was a space that was theirs, where they could have conversations about the questions that mattered to them. Can you love a stuffed animal?

That's a conversation I didn't have in graduate school, but it's a really interesting conversation. And especially to have with a group of people who love stuffed animals and are very attached to their stuffed animals. And I could see that these children were starting to develop a kind of renewed confidence in their own voices and an ability to express what they thought more articulately with greater skill, because part of the process of having these conversations was to ask them, "Well, why do you think that? Do you think you can love anything that doesn't love you back? Can you love a rock? Can you love a tree? And if so, is there a difference between loving a stuffed animal and loving a parent or a sibling or a friend."

And so these conversations are not so much a sharing of opinions as they are really trying to think together about these questions and take them seriously and listen to each other in ways that are both respectful but also interrogating each other. Why do you think that, and does this make sense? And this is the way in which I might disagree with it. What do you think of that? Et cetera. So if you're having a philosophical conversation, you're generally dealing with a question which remains somewhat unsettled. There's no agreed upon final answer to the question.

And so that creates an environment in which there's no pressure to find that one right answer. And so often in school, the questions that are asked, which generally are asked by teachers and not by students, are questions that are seeking one particular answer. And the teachers just waiting for the children to give that answer. And the children learn this really early, right? That that's how questions and answers happen in school. And so to create a space in which it's actually their questions that matter, and there is no one right answer, and I don't have the answer anymore than they do. I'm there to help facilitate us thinking together about the question.

It seemed to me that this was a space that really could be empowering for children. And the more I thought about my own childhood, the more I remembered that one of the ways in which I was able to navigate some of the more difficult situations in my early life was a real strong belief in my own judgment. The belief that how I saw the world mattered and had validity and that I could explain why I thought what I did and why I thought how I did. And I think that there's maybe no more powerful gift we can give to children than helping them to see their own perspectives as invaluable, as unable to be replaced by anyone else. And that what they see is worth articulating and that if there's a question that they have about something, it's not because there's something they don't know that they should. It's because there's something puzzling to wonder about and that they should be very comfortable sharing that.

Christiane: And so you're saying that it's not necessarily that you're going in and telling children, a philosopher named Plato said this, and then Aristotle said that, and now tell me back what Plato and Aristotle said... You're teaching them to think.

Jana Mohr Lone: Exactly. And I actually often say, we're not teaching children philosophy, [we're doing philosophy with children](#). And one of the things I love about this work is it's also a different way of understanding what it means to do philosophy. When I first started doing this, and even now, there are philosophers and other academics who would say to me, "Oh, but that's not real philosophy or that's baby philosophy." Right? Because children can't really "do philosophy," but of course that assumes that doing philosophy is doing what academics do. Not that what academic philosophers do is not philosophy, but it's not the only way to do philosophy. And I think philosophy is a human...we own it as human beings. It's not confined to the academy.

Whenever anyone asks, is this person really a friend or what's the right thing to do? Or why am I here? They're engaged in philosophical thinking. Similarly, children ask these big questions all the time, perhaps it's the time in life when we wonder the most, because everything's so new and we're so open to thinking about the strangeness of it all. And so in some ways I think children bring to philosophy special gifts that if the rest of us were willing to listen to, without a bunch of unexamined assumptions about what children can or can't do, they have a lot to teach us.

Christiane: You write that in our society, we have a lot of limiting beliefs about children. And so what are just a few of the limiting beliefs that you run up against, and then how can we begin to change those?

Jana Mohr Lone: People I think are very influenced by a developmental model of children. So we think, oh, if a five year old is asking about the nature of time, that five year old can't possibly understand what he or she is asking, whereas we don't really tend to say, "Oh, you can't really think about that at age 30. You have to wait until you're 45 to think about that." We really seem to do this primarily to children. And perhaps then again, at the end of life, we start to do that again for older people. But for children, we assume that there are a list of things that children at different ages can or can't do. And while there's some truth that there's a developmental model, of course we are developing as rapidly as we ever do in childhood. It is also really limiting, I think, to see children only as these developing beings who will eventually attain the status of adulthood.

And that's the whole point of childhood rather than seeing childhood itself as a really valuable period in life, which we all know influences us maybe more than any other time. But there's this idea that children are really not to be taken seriously because they haven't yet attained the perfect status of adults. And then we also, I think even when we're trying to listen to children or we think we listen to children, there's a tendency to focus on how cute they are. I hear this all the time and it just makes me crazy, people will say to me, "Oh, that's so adorable that that child said that." And I think, it's not adorable!

It's an interesting comment, you should think about it. If I said it, you wouldn't comment on how adorable it is.

Christiane: There's a passage in your book where you write really beautifully about how childhood in and of itself is something special to be regarded. And it's not just a way station to adulthood. And I loved that and found it very inspiring also as an adult, right? Because it means that as adults we can continue to develop and our brains are plastic, and we can continue to think about these questions much as we did as we were children.

Jana Mohr Lone: Exactly. I think it's [John Banville](#), who says that childhood is a state of constantly recurring astonishment or something like that. And I think that's just beautiful. I mean, it really is... the world is so fresh and new and we see it with the perspective of the beginner's mind. And it's hard to maintain that and adults do all kinds of things, right? Meditation, hikes, et cetera, to try and find that again. And children just, they just have it.

Christiane: So you also write that children actually possess quite a bit of moral wisdom. First of all, maybe just quickly explain what you mean by moral wisdom and then help us understand how it's possible for someone with so little experience to have any kind of wisdom at all.

Jana Mohr Lone: [Carol Gilligan](#) wrote about how early attachment that we have in life is really the beginning of moral wisdom or having a sense of morality because we develop these deep relational ties as infants and toddlers that set the stage for the kind of caring and empathetic response to other people that I think is at the base of morality and of our sense of having some kind of moral life. And I think that children are really good at seeing things straight. They both are willing to express what they think in unfiltered ways, but don't have as many justifications piled on top of one another to justify what is obviously an oppressive or unfair situation. And so they will just look at the world and say, well, of course we should be working to change what's creating conditions related to climate change because there are people around the world, even if it's not us, who are suffering.

And I think adults often would say in a conversation, oh, that's such a naive thing to say, right? It's not very sophisticated. It's sort of this, there are all these problems around that. I'm a big fan of philosophical naivete actually. I think that one of the barriers to imaginative, philosophical wondering is this sense that we need to be very sophisticated and we need to show that we have a lot of philosophical heft and knowledge, but that just coming up with imaginative ideas can often break us into new philosophical territory. And I think children are really good at that. And I think adults have to work at it much harder.

Christiane: So what are some of the ethics of listening when it comes to talking to children?

Jana Mohr Lone: Listening really requires a kind of openheartedness, a kind of willingness to suspend your own assumptions, whether about the person speaking or about the topic at hand, your immediate reactions often so many times, and we all do this, I think. We're listening, but we're thinking to ourselves what we want to say next. And to be able to just sit with what's being said, I think is really at the heart of what it means to listen. And I think that's maybe particularly challenging with children because we serve so much as adults in the capacity of helping children to learn how to do certain things. Right? So they're trying to articulate something and we want to help them. So we say, "Oh, is this what you mean?"

And sometimes that can be helpful, but sometimes it can really be putting words in a child's mouth. And a lot of times, because children have to learn that, absorb the message that adults know better than they do. They might say, "Yes, that is what I meant." Even if it really isn't what they meant, or they just feel shut down. And so they just say, "Yeah, that's what I meant," even though it's not. So I've learned to be really careful about balancing, trying to make sure I'm understanding what the child is saying with making sure I'm not filtering it through what I think is interesting or what I think is probably the way the speech is going.

A big part of listening to children is just being really aware of the power differential between children and adults. Children have a lot less power than adults, and they are very aware of that. And so in order to make sure that you're giving the child space to be an equal participant in the conversation, you have to really work at making that happen because it's your responsibility as the adult, because you're the one who has the greater power.

Christiane: What's the value in talking to children about philosophy and then maybe also about ethics?

Jana Mohr Lone: I think there's benefits for both the child and benefits for the adults and the benefits for the child are getting the message that they have something important to say, and that they can think out loud about a difficult topic with another child or an adult, or both, in a way that can help everyone involved think more clearly about it, that they can make progress. And that they're a real contributor to that conversation. Being taken seriously as a child is a powerful experience. And it is one that unfortunately many children rarely have. For adults I think that the benefits are, as I've said, I think we have something to learn from the freshness of perspective that children bring to these encounters.

And I also think that it helps us to be in touch with the way we saw the world as children, because once we leave childhood, we can't get it back. We have a memory of it, but our memories are pretty mixed and hazy and often distorted. And being around children can really bring you back in a small way into that child that still exists.

Christiane: I love the idea of empowering children and how important that is. I've worked with incarcerated women in an educational setting before, and it's just so clear sometimes when a woman has never heard from anyone in her life that she has anything valuable to contribute or that anything she says will be believed and it's incredible how deeply ingrained that can get into someone's brain and heart.

Jana Mohr Lone: It is really powerful. I have heard from children and adults over the years, how powerful that experience can be to feel for the first time that I have something worth saying. And if you're someone who has had that experience a lot, it might be hard for you to imagine what it's like never to have it.

Christiane: If we wanted to engage the children in our life, whether they're our own children or children of friends, how do we start with that?

Jana Mohr Lone: I think you start really by listening. So because a lot of times children will say things and if you're listening for the philosophical content, you'll hear it. So it's listening to what they're asking and saying, and responding to them in a way that's genuinely interested, not to portray how great the conversation with a child could be or whatever, but to really understand what the child is saying to you. I think as I've written about, I think if you're a parent and you're someone who likes to read with your child, picture books are so philosophically suggestive and it's a particularly powerful way to go about it. Some children will just spontaneously ask lots of questions. Other children are more reserved about that.

So you can start by saying, this makes me wonder about whatever it is it makes you wonder about. I think one of the things that's really important is to model for children, that wondering is something you can continue to do all your life. I think a lot of times children get the message that wondering is not really a very valuable way to spend your time. And adults often are so

caught up in the busyness of daily lives that we don't really value wondering, or spend a lot of time wondering.

But if we can get back to that, because there are so many things to wonder about in life, pretty much anything, right? And if you can get back to just articulating that to a child, it can be something really... The most simple things, like I do this great little exercise with kids usually towards the end of the year, if I've been there all year in a classroom, where I bring in something that's sweet and we spend the whole time talking about whether it's dessert, right?

Because we're having it in the middle of the day. We haven't had a meal, but it's the kind of food you have a dessert and ends up being this really interesting conversation that leads you to conclude that you really don't know what dessert is. It's way more complex than you ever would've thought, but it's these little ordinary things that we just assume we know. And then when we start to interrogate it, we realize it's actually quite complex. And so it's helping children to just see that the most ordinary things can give rise to wonder, and to thinking about the puzzles of life and how much richer the world is when you allow yourself time to do that. So I think just being someone who is willing to do that out loud with your child opens up spaces for them to do a right along with you and often to lead the way, because often they're already thinking about all kinds of wondering like that.

Christiane: Did we leave anything out that you would like to cover, or?

Jana Mohr Lone: The only thing we didn't talk about that often comes up and that's often really interesting to parents, especially, is all the questions that children have about death. Because they think that that's an area that parents often struggle with how to respond to children's questions, concerns, worries about death. And what I find invariably is that when I ask a group of children any age, I would say, starting in kindergarten, preschool and up through high school, what questions do you wonder the most about, death is almost always on the list. Why do people have to die? What happens when people die, et cetera, et cetera. And I think there are ways to engage in these conversations where you don't have to have the answers. I think that's, parents often feel like that because they don't know answers to those answers to those questions, they're stymied and they just want to change the subject. They're afraid maybe their child will get uncomfortable or anxious.

But what I hear from children and from adults who write to me about how they felt as children, is that many, many children think about death all the time. It's a new idea for them. It can be scary. It's confusing. They want to think about it. They want to talk about it. You can engage in those conversations in a way that you're just a fellow person thinking about it, right? So what would it be like if we never died? Would that be something we would want? Because the more you think about that, the more you realize how problematic that concept is as well. I think there's a comfort for children and having that space be open to them and not feeling like if they talk about the feeling about fear of nothingness or like the concern that life could end at any time. That being able to just talk through that. So what is nothingness? What does that mean? You could have these conversations in a way I think that just helps, at least what I hear from children is it

just helps them so much to know they can have the conversation because it's very lonely if you're someone who thinks about death a lot to feel that no one else is thinking about it and that there's no one you can talk to.

[Interview ends]

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Cornice]

Christiane: If you want to know more about Jana Mohr Lone's work, including a link to another episode he recently appeared on, check out our show notes page at examiningethics.org.

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