

Sean Rameswaram (host): Another weekend, another episode of Today, Explained to Kids, which typically would have me saying something like, “Adults, time to break out the earmuffs,” but honestly, I think you adults could stand to learn a thing or two from this one. I’m going to hand it off to Izii and Kiarra on Today, Explained to Kids.

<pre-roll>
<THEME SONG>

IZII: Hey Kiarra!

KIARRA: Hi Izii! How’s it going?

IZII: It’s going great! I’m actually just finishing up putting together the plan for the next episode of Today Explained to Kids!

KIARRA: Ummmm... I think you’re mistaken. It’s my turn to plan the next episode. I have an AMAZING idea for a show about my friend Zip, the hummingbird. He has such good eyes, he can see all these extra colors that are invisible to humans! Since it’s a podcast, Zip’s gonna just talk about all the colors we can’t see.

IZII: Um, actually, Kiarra, I think YOU’RE mistaken. It’s *my* turn to plan an episode and it’s going to be about the physics of spaghetti, like why it’s so hard to break it into just two pieces, how it will curl when it’s boiled, and how to get it perfectly *al dente* every time. The world has been waiting for a podcast about spaghetti science and THIS will be my MASTERPIECE.

KIARRA: If you want to know if your pasta is cooked, you can just TASTE it! Nobody cares about the *physics of spaghetti!*

IZII: Oh! And people wanna hear about colors they can’t even see!?! On a *podcast*?!

KIARRA: Well, if you would just hear me out...

IZII: And if you would just open your mind a little, *you’d* understand that spaghetti science is *fascinating*. And everyone *loves* spaghetti!

KIARRA: Everyone loves COLORS!

IZII: But it’s MY TURN!

KIARRA: No it’s not!

IZII: Yes it is!

KIARRA: No it’s not!

IZII: Yes it —

<Island of Explained portal sounds...>

IZII+KIARRA: AHHHHHH!!!

KIARRA: What just happened?!

IZII: I don't know... I think we just portalled to the Island of Explained. But it's weird, I've never portalled into a *boring building* before.

KIARRA: But why are we here?

IZII: I don't know, Kiarra. You think I *wanted* to portal here? You think this is *my fault*?

KIARRA: Well all I know is, *I* didn't portal us here.

IZII: UGH! I just wanted to spend the day working on my new episode and now instead I'm here with *you* — in this cold, grey hallway!

<flickering/buzzing fluorescent lights>

IZII: And why is this lighting so bad!?

KIARRA: More importantly, where's the portal?

IZII: <gasp> I don't even see a portal anywhere... but there's always a portal... This is SO WEIRD. How are we gonna get back? And are we even on the Island of Explained?

KIARRA: Hey, look out this window; it seems like we definitely ARE on the Island of Explained!

IZII: Yeah, that's what I SAID. Let's just go outside and find another portal. This hallway to the left looks like the way out.

KIARRA: No, I think we should take the hallway on the right.

IZII: Look, it's gotta be on the left. I'M going left.

KIARRA: Well, I'm going RIGHT.

IZII: You're impossible!

<footsteps as Izii goes left and Kiarra goes right... they bump into each other>

IZII: Woah!

KIARRA: What? I went right... and you went left... and now we're both in the same place again!

IZII: <annoyed & stressed out> How did we end up here? This place is the worst! Is this hallway just one big circle?

<door opens>

ENGINEAR: Nope, not a circle! It's more like a labyrinth... a maze! Isn't it cool?

KIARRA: It is definitely *not cool*. What *is* this place? And how do we get out of here? We need to find a portal back home.

ENGINEAR: Sure, sure! We'll get you back home... right after your appointment.

IZII: But we don't have an appointment.

ENGINEAR: Are you... <reads notes> Izii and Kiarra?

IZII: Uhhhh... yeah?

ENGINEAR: Then you have an appointment... with me! I'm the Engin-**EAR**, my specialty is ears. And this is the Hearin' Now Clinic! Come in, come in!

KIARRA: I'm still not following...

ENGINEAR: I'm the one who brought you here... to fix your ears! Obviously. You haven't really been hearing each other.

IZII: I really don't like this at all.

KIARRA: Yeah, can you just send us back home through the portal?

ENGINEAR: <aside> Oof, looks like I've got my work cut out for me. <loudly> I told you, my specialty is ears and I'm going to help you hear.

KIARRA: <with sarcasm> Okay, how are you going to help us hear, Engineer?

ENGINEAR: Well, first I need to scan your ears and brains. Now, if the two of you would just step into this shiny metal cube...

IZII: I'm not getting in there!

ENGINEAR: Well if you won't get in, how else am I supposed to help you get back home? You're obviously here because you haven't been hearing each other and the first thing we need to do is make sure your ears are working properly. So... in you go.

IZII + KIARRA: Fine.

<scanning sounds>

ENGINEAR: Ok, all done! Come on out and see. These are giant versions of your ears and brains.

KIARRA: Wow, there's so much stuff in there!

IZII: Yeah, look at all that wax!

KIARRA: Gross! But what's all that other stuff? Is that a snail??

ENGINEAR: Nope! That's your inner ear; I'll get to that in a minute. Let's start from the part of your ear we can all already see, the outer ear. It's shaped kinda like a bowl to help make sounds louder and funnel them into your head. The sounds go through the ear canal - that's this little tunnel over here - and you see this drum?

KIARRA: There's a DRUM in our ears?

ENGINEAR: Well it's built like a drum; it's a thin piece of skin stretched tight like a drum. The eardrum! The eardrum is attached to three teeny tiny bones, the smallest bones in your body. So when sounds hit the eardrum, it makes those tiny bones vibrate. Those bones make the sounds louder and send them into this snail-shaped part called the inner ear. And INSIDE that snail are millions of tiny little hair-shaped cells, which turn sounds into electricity.

IZII: WOW! I had no idea I could turn sounds into electricity!

ENGINEAR: That's not the half of it! Next, those electrical impulses travel across neurons in the brain, brain cells! They go all the way down to the bottom of your brain, then to the center of your brain, and finally back out to the edges of your brain... right next to your ears.

IZII: So after our ears turn the sounds into electricity, that electricity goes bouncing around our brains!? That's amazing!

ENGINEAR: Yeah, it's pretty cool! Now, let's see how well you're both hearing. I'll push this button to activate test mode <click> and... <loudly> HELLOOOOOOOOO!!!

KIARRA: Ack!

IZII: Oof!

ENGINEAR: Okay, here we go. See? The sound is going through your outer ear... hitting the eardrum... tiny bones, snail thing... and this lightbulb up over here shows that... yeah, looks like both of you are hearing just fine.

IZII: Then what are we still doing here?!

KIARRA: Wait! What's *that* light?

ENGINEAR: Huh?

KIARRA: The one that's *not* lighting up?

ENGINEAR: Oh of course! That's the *listening* light. Seems like you're both hearing but not listening.

IZII: What's the difference?

ENGINEAR: Well, *hearing*-- that's my specialty-- that's about how your ears detect sounds. But listening is something else altogether.

KIARRA: Huh? What does that mean?

ENGINEAR: Some people can't hear, or have trouble hearing, and they communicate in different ways like through sign language or writing. Listening is when you actually pay attention to what someone is communicating to you, however they're communicating to you. It's about understanding. And when you're in a fight, listening can be the hardest thing to do.

IZII: If someone here isn't listening, it's definitely not me.

KIARRA: I always listen to my friends! You're the one who never listens, Izii!

IZII: Oh yeah? Well watch this: Engineer, I'd like to LISTEN to you tell me how to fix this listening problem, so we can get off the island.

ENGINEAR: Well, that's actually *not* my specialty. Maybe you weren't listening when I said this before, but I'm an engineAR, so I focus on the ears... and how *hearing* works. But you don't actually need your hearing to work to be able to LISTEN. If *listening* is your problem, I've got a colleague who can probably help you. I'll send her your brain scans and you can see her now. Just go down the hall and make a right after the break.

-----<BREAK>-----

IZII: It's always nice to have a little break... that ear exam was kinda wild.

KIARRA: I can't believe we went through all of that only for that Engin-ear to tell us our ears are working... AND we're still stuck here.

IZII: Ugh, stop complaining, Kiarra; it's your fault we're here in the first place.

KIARRA: It is not! It's your fault we're here!

IZII: UGH!! Let's just see if the Engine-ear's colleague can help us.

<knock on the door, door opens>

IZII: Hi, I'm Izii and this is Kiarra. The Engin-ear said you could help fix our listening?... But she didn't tell us who you are.

DR ERIN: I'm Dr. Erin Clabough. I'm a neuroscientist and I do research on how we can better understand each other and how our neurons connect together. Um, and can change based on the things that we do and feel and experience.

KIARRA: That sounds promising... Oh! I see the Enginear sent you our brain scans.

DR ERIN: Yeah, yeah.

IZII: Sooo... what are we looking at here?

DR ERIN: We have a map of the whole brain in front of us, and what's important to know is that every single part of the map is responsible for something else that you do with your behavior.

KIARRA: Okay, so each part of our brains does something different... and the Engine-ear said the parts of our brains that hear are working just fine. So which part of the brain helps us listen? And how is that different from hearing?

DR ERIN: When you're really listening to someone, the information travels into lots of different areas in the brain where you can really consider what they're saying. And you can think about the way they might be thinking and feeling, and then you can respond accordingly. So there's a big difference between simply hearing the sounds that someone's saying and understanding what they're actually meaning, or the place that they're coming from.

KIARRA: But I DO understand what Izii is saying. They don't care about colors!

IZII: That's not what I'm saying! That's not what I meant!

KIARRA: And they want to take my turn away from me!

IZII: I never said that! Kiarra! I don't think you really were listening... Dr Erin is right!

KIARRA: Well, it's really HARD to listen to somebody when you're in an argument! It's hard to listen when you're angry, and when you know you're right and your friend is wrong! What if I don't *want* to listen?

DR ERIN: When you're having an argument and you only hear someone instead of listening to them, you are going to be at the same place at the end of the conversation as you were when you came in, because you're simply waiting your turn until they stop talking so that you can say what you want to say. But if you really are listening to someone, you actually might change your perspective based on what they're saying. If you're only hearing, then there's really no point of having the conversation. If you're listening, you can actually make really meaningful change and you can resolve conflict in a much easier way than if you only have your hearing ears on.

IZII: Huh, okay, I think I see what you mean. If Kiarra and I don't listen to each other, we'll never be able to find a solution to our argument. So... where do we start? What's the key to being a good listener?

DR ERIN: Empathy.

IZII: Empathy?

KIARRA: What's that?

DR ERIN: Empathy is getting outside of our own self. So you understand what emotions they might be experiencing, what feelings... if they're feeling sad or happy, based on something that happened to them.

KIARRA: I think I get what you mean... but how do we DO that? Especially when we're feeling our *own* feelings already?

IZII: Yeah! Like if I'm feeling really mad at Kiarra because *she* thinks it's her turn to choose a topic for Today Explained to Kids, but *I know* it's really *my* turn... <exasperated> I just don't know if I can empathize with her right now.

KIARRA: Yeah! I'm too mad at Izii to even try! But I do want to get back home. So... how can we practice empathy?

<a unicorn flies in>

KIARRA: Whoaaaaa!

DR ERIN: This is the unicorn of empathy.

IZII: A UNICORN?!

DR ERIN: The unicorn has the ability to let anyone that touches its coat to be able to feel what someone else is feeling or to pretend to be that other person for 10 seconds.

KIARRA: How does it work?

DR ERIN: All you need to do, if you want to know how someone is feeling, you think of that person in your head and you place your hand right in between the unicorn's eyes, right underneath its horn. And you'll be able to take the point of view as the person that you're thinking of. You can step into that person's shoes.

KIARRA: Okay, so I'm putting my hand on the unicorn's face...

<unicorn sounds>

KIARRA: ... and I'm thinking of Izii...

<some SFX here - empathy>

KIARRA: I can understand that Izii is feeling angry... but not just angry... also... hurt? They feel like I don't care about them or their feelings or opinions, and it's making them sad.

<SFX out>

KIARRA: Izii... is that how you're feeling?

IZII: I mean, yeah. It really hurt me that you just shot down my spaghetti science idea, even though you know how much I love spaghetti. [pause] Hmm! This Unicorn of Empathy really is something! I wanna try too! I'll put my hand on the unicorn's coat...

<empathy SFX here>

IZII: Hmm... she really believes it's her turn to choose an episode topic... and she's frustrated that we don't agree.

<SFX out>

<unicorn sounds>

KIARRA: Wowwww empathy is pretty amazing!

DR ERIN: It's, uh, like a super power in some ways, like to be able to step outside yourself. It's not super easy to do, and it does need to be practiced.

KIARRA: WAIT. You mean I can have the Super Power of empathy just by *practicing*?!

DR ERIN: The one thing that I wish everyone, kids and adults knew about empathy and about listening is that we get better at it every time we do it.

IZII: Hmmm, so... let's just say, *hypothetically*, that I *don't* have a unicorn of empathy at home. How am I supposed to practice empathy and get really good at listening to other people and resolving all of our conflicts?

DR ERIN: In order to be a good listener, you need to take a minute to be open to what the other person is saying, so that you're really listening to them. The second thing you need to do is you need to try to put yourself in their shoes and take their perspective. So that means is pretend—with all the creativity that you can have there—pretend that you are that person. What would they be thinking? What would they be feeling?

IZII: I can try that...

DR ERIN: If you're fighting with a friend, I think that coming together and having a conversation is the most important thing to do. However, you shouldn't rush that conversation. If you feel overly angry or hurt, you should wait a little bit until you're clearly thinking and have kind of reflected on the things that you want to say.

KIARRA: Okay, so step one: take a deep breath and try to cool down.

IZII: And step two: use your imagination to try to understand what the other person could be feeling and thinking.

KIARRA: Got it!

ERIN: The most important thing when you're resolving conflict with a friend is to figure out together how you're going to do it differently going forward. So you don't end up in the same situation again.

IZII: Okay...

ERIN: If you're someone who had your feelings hurt, I would suggest that you say how you feel. Tell them how you would like to be treated differently or how you think you can resolve it. If you're somebody who hurt someone else's feelings, I would say that you need to own what you did, take responsibility for it. You need to understand where the other person is coming from and you need to tell them how you're going to do it differently next time.

IZII: Kiarra, I don't want to fight with you.

KIARRA: I don't want to fight with you either, Izii. You're my friend and I love learning on the Island of Explained with you.

IZII: Me too! Although I have to admit, I would like to find a portal OFF this island and get back home.

KIARRA: Same. But... how?

<unicorn makes some noises, moves hooves around, maybe a little wing flap>

KIARRA: Unicorn of Empathy? Can *you* help us get home?

<more unicorn noise>

IZII: Well, okay! Let's hop on!

<Kiarra & Izii get on the unicorn, who takes flight... zooming around sfx...>

KIARRA: Izii, I'm sorry I hurt your feelings when I said nobody cares about spaghetti science. I know you love spaghetti and a lot of other people do too.

IZII: And I know you were just so excited about colors we can't see and... I have to admit, it is a pretty good podcast idea.

KIARRA: Thanks, Izii. Maybe next time we could come up with a topic together?

IZII: I'd love to do that, but what could it be?

KIARRA: Mmmm. Maybe there's a great topic right under our noses... Maybe *THIS* is the podcast?

IZII: Huh?

KIARRA: What we just did... listening!

IZII: YEAH! We can learn about the ears and the brain...

KIARRA: And the Unicorn of Empathy!

IZII: Of *course* the Unicorn of Empathy! Hey what's that over there!?

KIARRA: Is that a portal?

<Portal SFX>

IZII: We made it back!

KIARRA: And it's all thanks to you!

IZII: And you!

<music>

CREDITS: This episode was written and produced by Shoshi Shmulovitz. The team at Transmitter Media includes Isabel Carter, Kiarra Powell, Daphne Chen, and Sara Nics. The team at Vox includes Noam Hassenfeld and Byrd Pinkerton. Our executive producers are Gretta Cohn and Katherine Wells. Meral Agish is our fact checker. Sophia Lanman sound designed and mixed the series. Special thanks to Dr Erin Clabough, a neuroscientist at the University of Virginia, and to her unicorn of empathy. You can hear all of our episodes, and find related activities, at [vox.com/today-explained-to-kids](https://www.vox.com/today-explained-to-kids)