Podcast: Imagine This

Episode: Why does a snake go “ssss” with its tongue poking out?

Duration: 8’06

[ABC Podcast sting - This is an ABC Podcast]

Bri: Hello, Bri here. Today on Imagine This, I'm wondering if you can think about something that might slither, and something that might hide in the grass, and something that makes a sound like this.

[hissing]

What do you think it is?

Kids: A snake. A snake.

Bri: Yes, a snake. Have you ever seen a snake before?

[Soft, playful brass music]

Kids: I saw a snake come when I was at the picnic and it saw me. So then I was running so, so, so super, super, duper fast!

I don't like snake it's too scary.

And they're dangerous.

Bri: We're going to stick together today and learn all about snakes because our question comes from four-year-old Lewis and he wants to know something about these snakes.

Lewis: Why do a snake do, "ssss" with their tongue poking out?

Bri: Why does a snake go, "ssss" with it's tongue poking out?

[Suspenseful orchestral music]

What do you think the snack is saying when it says "ssss"?

Kids: He's saying, "I'm so hungry." He's saying that.

Bri: Maybe the snakes had a big day and it’s saying, "I'm so sleepy."

[Snoring]

Kids: Um...I don't think so

[giggles]

Bri: Maybe the snake has a secret to tell us.

[Curious classical music]

Kids: Maybe he's saying a mermaid live under the ocean

Bri: Maybe snakes do know things that we don't know. I think we need a snake translator. Someone who can tell us what the snake might be saying. Hang on. I know someone who speaks snake language.

Kids: Wow.

That's cool.

Bri: That is pretty cool. Let's call him out and see if he comes. Ssssss... What's that I hear in the tall grass, Tim, is that you?

Tim: Yep. G’day.

Bri: G’day Tim! This is Dr. Timothy Jackson from the University of Melbourne. He is a snake expert. Do you want to say hello to Tim?

Kids: Hello!

Hello.

Tim: Hi, nice to be here.

Bri: Thanks for joining us. Tim, why does a snake go “ssss”?

Tim: Hissing is the closest thing to talking for a snake. When snakes go, "ssss", They're telling you to watch out, go away.

Bri: Oh, so the snake wants me to go away.

Tim: Yes, that's right. They're giving you a warning. Not to come too close. Some snakes go, "Ssss! Don't come near me. Ssss! I'm a bit scared of you. Ssss! I've got fangs and I'm not afraid to use them."

Kids: Oh, what!

It's really scary sound for me.

Bri: It is a scary sound, but it's supposed to be a scary sound. The snake is giving you a warning.

Tim: Ssss! Danger. Ssss! Warning, warning.

Bri: To back off and to go away. But what about the tongue part? Have you ever seen a snake's tongue?

Kids: It's different from most people, it's a bit sharp.

What is that?

It looks like a bug.

Bri: Oh yeah. I can see why it looks like a bug. It's kind of got two little spiky bits at the end of its tongue. Is it supposed to go like that Tim?

Tim: Yep. At the end, a snake's tongue is split in two.

Kids: It's different because it's a snake and snakes don't look like people.

It looks like a mermaid's tail.

Bri: A snake's tongue looks like a mermaid tail?

[Magical music]

Kids: Yes.

I think because it has two corners, and that's why he thinks it because the mermaid's have two corners.

Bri: Oh yeah. I see what you mean about the mermaid's tail. At the end of the snake's tongue, one bit goes this way and one bit goes that way, just like the end of a mermaid's tail. So Tim, what does a snake use its spiky tongue for?

Tim: A snake uses its tongue to smell.

Kids: Wow.

Bri: If snakes smell with their tongues, how do people smell?

[Curious strings]

Kids: Their nose!

Their nose. People don't smell with their tongue, they taste with their tongue.

Kids: And we have nose at the bottom, and they have nose up here.

People's nose are like this shape and their noses is that shape.

Bri: So how do you smell with your nose?

[Sniffing]

Kids: I got a blocked nose.

Bri: Aw, blocked nose. Do you think snakes ever get a blocked nose?

[Kids sneeze, giggle]

Kids: No!

Bri: What is a snake trying to smell?

Tim: Snakes can smell danger. They poke out their tongues and they flicker them about. They poke out their tongues and point them in different directions.

Some snakes go,

[Tongue flicking]

"What do you want? Why are you bothering me? Are you food? Are you friendly? Or are you dangerous?"

Bri: So the snake's tongue is split into to tell it which way to go.

Tim: Yes, that's right. They slither towards the food and they slither away from danger fast as they can.

Bri: Tim, someone once told me that snake's love to eat people. Is that true?

Tim: Not really. Snakes aren't out to get you, but if you do see or hear one, leave it alone.

Kids: Because snakes can bite.

[Snake rattling]

[Soft classical music]

Bri: They do have pretty sharp teeth. So Lewis, the reason a snake goes, "ssss" is because it's telling you to go away. It's giving you a warning. The reason they poke out they're pointy tongues that looked like mermaid’s tails is so they can smell what's out there, and know which way to go, to find food or to slither away from danger. That's a pretty clever tongue.

[Kids make tongue flicking noises]

Bri: Did you know that smelling is one of our five senses and it helps us know what's out there too? Just like a snake. If you close your eyes and take a deep breath in through your nose you might be able to smell all kinds of different things. I wonder what's out there...

[Sniffs]

Bri: Imagine This is produced by me, Brianna Peterson, and is a co-production between The Conversation and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. For more episodes of Imagine This, plus a range of music and stories for young children, download the ABC Kids Listen app.