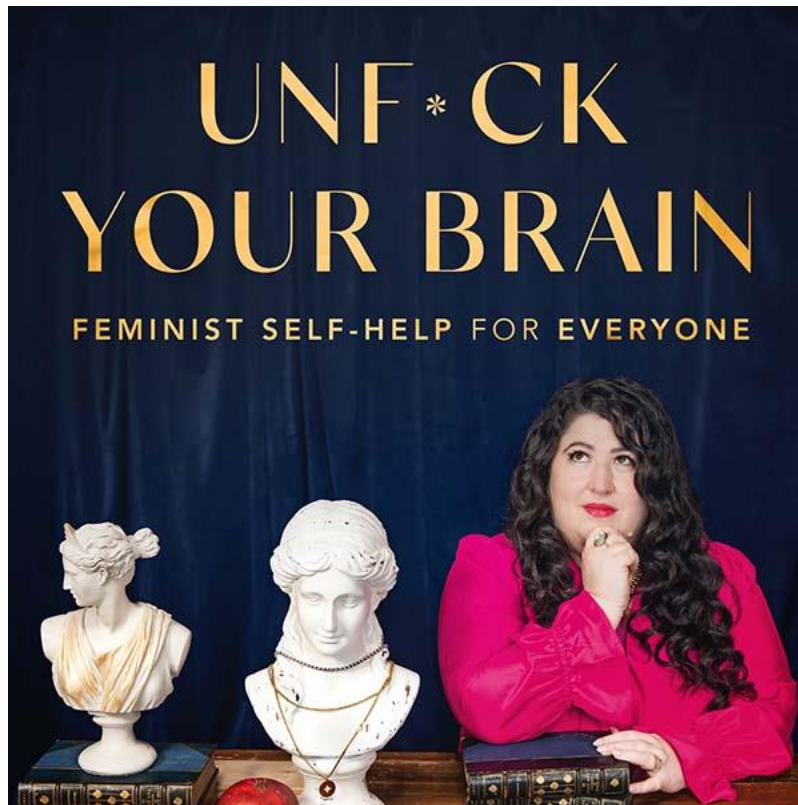


# UFYB 363: Raising Feminist Kids (and Raising Yourself!): A Conversation with Jo-Ann Finkelstein



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Kara Loewentheil**

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Alright, my friends, when I booked this interview I did not know this. There was no flattery involved in the booking, but I was just talking to our guest who has an incredible book coming out that I'm really excited to talk about. And turns out she used to be a podcast listener or still is sometimes, which as you all heard from me, when you are publishing a book, you barely are sleeping and eating, much less doing everything else like listening to podcasts. So, listen, you too one day, write a great book, do something cool. Come on the podcast and we'll talk about it.

Today we are talking to Dr. Jo-Ann Finkelstein. So, I'm really excited to talk about this book. Her book that is coming out is called *Sexism and Sensibility*. First of all, a Jane Austen pun right in the title is, I'm already just kvelling already. And then the subtitle is *Raising Empowered, Resilient Girls in the Modern World*.

But listen, even if you don't have children, or if you have boys or whoever you have, whatever gender of your child, whatever gender you are, you still want to listen to this. Because it's going to help you understand how you were raised, how you can contribute to raising your own kids, your friends' kids, your nephews, your nieces, whatever, in a better way. So, this is for everybody, even if you're not actively parenting your own children right now.

Welcome to *UnF\*ck Your Brain*. I'm your host, Kara Loewentheil, Master Certified Coach and Founder of the *School of New Feminist Thought*. I'm here to help you turn down your anxiety, turn up your confidence and create a life on your own terms, one that you're truly excited to live. Let's go.

Kara: So, Jo-Ann, welcome. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and your background? You've got doctor in front of your name, so we know

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some kind of fancy credentials are happening. Tell us a little bit about who you are and how you ended up writing this book.

Jo-Ann: Sure. Yeah, I grew up in Canada and I, through kind of weird channels, ended up doing all of my schooling in the United States. And so, I majored in sociology and French and nothing to do with psychology. I don't think I took one psychology class in undergrad. And then eventually I decided that I wanted to work with Carol Gilligan, who for listeners who don't know who she is, she is sort of the original feminist psychologist.

I went and did my master's at Harvard to work with her, and that completely changed my life because it made me realize I wanted to do a doctorate in psychology. And this book that I wrote is kind of the culmination of, okay, there's not a lot of French in it, but there's a lot of sociology and a lot of psychology and some Carol Gilligan in it. And just to addend that, I don't consider myself a feminist psychologist. I'm not an activist psychologist. I really do let my patients take the lead, but I have learned so much from them, and they have informed my activism.

So yeah, that's who I am and I can tell you a little bit too about why I wrote the book if you want to hear that.

Kara: Yeah, I'd love to hear that. I'm also interested in the idea that if you were a feminist therapist, that would mean you're an activist and you're a therapist. I guess when I think of being a feminist coach, I just think it means that my coaching is informed by my understanding of socialization and feminism. Which I feel it would be hard to coach or do therapy work with women without being informed of that. I feel we see so much bad coaching and therapy because that lens is lacking.

Jo-Ann: Yeah, well, I think you're right. I mean, that's a great point because I definitely am able to hear what my patients are bringing me through a

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feminist lens. But I'm not one to say, "That's sexist." They will bring really sexist things to me, maybe they were fondled on the bus or a man at work stole their idea. And then that will sort of lead, what are the echoes of that in your past and it will lead them down a path of, oh, wait, I have been dismissed my whole life.

My ideas haven't been taken seriously or I have been touched inappropriately more times than I can possibly count. And so, it's a little less activisty than I am in my sort of the rest of my life.

Kara: Of course, yeah. I think that's so important for people to understand though. The value of seeking out a feminist coach or a therapist, or of becoming a feminist coach or a therapist is really that you have the full picture. So, if somebody comes in and they have been groped, you are not thinking about it from this patriarchal standpoint, unconsciously, of well, were you on the subway too late at night or whatever. And of course, I don't think any of the listeners of this podcast would ever say that. But it's just you don't see the patterns as much when you don't have that lens.

And you're not able to, I don't think you can validate your clients in the same way, but of course, you're not issuing a ruling. I had somebody come to a coaching session the other day and was like, "But I don't know, both these choices are feminist, so I don't know which one to do." And I was like, "I don't know which one you should do." My job as a feminist coach or your job as a feminist therapist is not to issue a verdict on the feminist response to this rubber stamp on, yes, that is the feminist response.

It's not at all about what your client or your patient is going to do, it's just how can you help them see it in a bigger picture. But I think it's so important to address, because I think therapists, when I have therapists who come through my programs as clients and we're working on something for therapists as well, their fear is that that's what it's going to mean. Well, if

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I decide to do this, when my client comes in and says that she really is fine doing all the dishes. I have to be like, “That’s bad. You’re being a bad feminist. Let’s change that.” And that’s not at all what we’re talking about.

Jo-Ann: Not at all. But I think your point is well taken that there is such an intersection between mental health and social justice.

Kara: Right. How can your mental health not be impacted by the messages you’ve been receiving and the way you’ve been treated by society for your whole life? It’s actually kind of bananas that anybody is allowed to coach or be a therapist without that context. You’re missing 80% of what impacts somebody’s brain. It’s so wild. So anyway, your book is actually about parenting. So, we could have a whole other conversation about feminism and therapy. But can you talk a little bit about, yeah, how did you come to write this particular book that really focuses on that parenting journey?

Jo-Ann: Yeah. So, like I said, I grew up in Canada where hockey is a national obsession. And I love to tell this story because it’s not in the book and my family was so surprised it wasn’t in the book because it’s become family lore. So, my three brothers, I have got three brothers, they loved hockey, and I wanted to play too. So, I asked my parents for a hockey stick. To my delight, they bought me one, but to my horror it was bright pink and looked like a toy version of my brothers’.

I’ve worked with girls and women for the last 24 years in my private practice, and what I discovered is that my pink hockey stick is every girl’s story. They might not have gotten a pink hockey stick, but they did and do get messages that make them feel unseen, unheard, not taken seriously. And I have witnessed just how harmful these messages are to my patients’ sense of self and their sense of potential. These messages are like tiny psychological paper cuts that accumulate, becoming festering wounds of self-doubt.

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So, growing up, when I would get upset about the gender differences that I noticed, people insisted that they didn't exist or they'd say, "You're too sensitive, stop being so dramatic."

Kara: If we had to raise a hand if you're listening to this podcast and you heard that you were too sensitive, I just feel every single hand would go up.

Jo-Ann: It's classic comments that I now know girls and women hear all the time, but I did not know that back then. And so, to avoid criticism, I learned to kind of hide my feelings. And it wasn't until years later when I was doing a master's degree that I began to truly understand more fully that experience. I mentioned in a paper for my developmental psychology class that I'd been accused of overreacting when I felt demeaned. And the professor scribbled in the margins, "That's what people say to talk girls out of their feelings."

It was such a validating moment for me. So validating girls' experiences and opening parents' eyes are two of the reasons why I wrote my book.

Kara: Amazing. So, let's talk about that. How can parents start to kind of explore their own biases? Because I think especially people listening to this podcast, they're probably not going home and saying to their daughters, "Someday you'll marry a nice man and just stay home and cook and bear his babies." That's probably not our listeners, but we all have all of these biases embedded.

I was talking to a friend of mine the other day who has a youngish teenage daughter, 12 or 13, who developed early and she's having conflict with her daughter over what's okay to wear to school. And she's like, "I'm a pro sex feminist. I don't think I'm being sexist." But her daughter, of course, is like, "You're being sex negative and I can wear what I want."

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Jo-Ann: My body, my choice, yeah.

Kara: Yeah, right. And my friend is like, “Am I losing my mind? I don’t think I am that person, but also this doesn’t seem appropriate. I don’t know what to do.” So how can parents start to explore their own biases to combat that kind of sexism?

Jo-Ann: I have so much to say about this.

Kara: I mean buy the book obviously is how you learn the full answer.

Jo-Ann: Well, right, because so much of it is unconscious. So even the most progressive of us have these ways that we’re transmitting these messages. So, yeah, in the book, it’s a catalog of all of the things that we might be doing to shut our kids down.

In fact, I just had a reader reach out to me saying that she had this light bulb moment while reading the book, that she was shutting down her daughter’s opinions, even though her son has stronger opinions and is often more critical than her daughter. And so, she went to her daughter and said, which is what I advocate in the book, she went to her daughter and said, “I think I’ve been shutting down your opinions for some reason.” And her daughter started to cry from the recognition because she knew something was off.

She would complain her mother didn’t listen to her, but it wasn’t quite that. And so, I think when we can notice these things and actually make changes, I like to call it R&R parenting, recognize and replace what we’re doing. It really can make a difference in our girls’ lives. So basically, I would say that girls don’t grow up with a healthy sense of entitlement.

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The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation did this global examination of inequality, and they found that adolescence is when girls' and boys' futures start to diverge. Because adolescence is when girls start to realize that women are not taken seriously, which comes with a catalog of moments in their lives of being interrupted, dismissed, ignored, of being scolded when they're angry or, yeah, mocked for having any strong opinions.

And to put it into concrete terms, Kara, as early as third grade, girls start asking for less than boys, especially when negotiating with a man. And that reflects the same gap in negotiations we see in adulthood. So, without even realizing it, girls are beginning to feel they're not entitled to things like speaking up, respect, money. Why? Because when they speak, we interrupt them. Because we teach them that it's more important to be liked than it is to be respected.

And because when it comes to money, we don't even talk to them about money or we talk far more to boys about money than we do to girls about money. We just think girls won't need money or they'll marry.

Kara: It's like they were just supposed to marry somebody else who's going to provide the money for them. Yeah, we don't think that explicitly, but how much are we talking about those things as early and as often?

Jo-Ann: And we're paying boys more for chores. There's all this research that shows that. We save more money for college for boys than for girls.

Kara: Wow. I feel good about that when I'm putting the same amount in the 529s for both my step-kids. I've got that at least. So, you talk about one of the big categories of stereotypes or overall traits, we're kind of inculcating women as being submissive, of going along with the flow or putting our needs last. And I have been working a lot recently on this idea of over-

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responsibility. The idea that women are socialized to take responsibility for everything but always put themselves last.

So, they're taking responsibility for everything and everyone around them, but actually not for themselves in some ways, because they're always at the bottom of things. So, I think it would just be helpful for people to have some specific examples of both a way we do this and also and you just gave 12. So, we could pick one of those. And then what does it look like to recognize and repair how explicit?

I think sometimes people get stuck because they start to learn as they're working on their parenting, whether it's from this angle or it's just about emotional regulation or whatever. They're like, "Okay, I see a better way of doing it, but my kid is 13 now. And I can't undo what I did and I don't know how appropriate it is to be explicit that I realized I was fucking it up, and now I'm trying to do better." Can you talk a little bit about what that kind of recognize and replace can look like?

Jo-Ann: So, I think one example would be how that woman did explicitly say, "I think I'm doing this because I'm not used to girls having strong opinions or I know that women with strong opinions often get shut down or often are seen as aggressive." And so, you are talking directly, it doesn't have to be how I fucked up, but you're bringing in teachable moments that have happened along the way to your daughter, to yourself, to what you're seeing on TV to talk explicitly about how sexism lives in the world.

But I think what you are getting at is something I write about in the book, which I call it the invisible work of girlhood, which I see as the antecedent to the over-responsibility and all the invisible labor that women are doing in adulthood. And it starts with good being the gold standard for girls, but not boys. We expect girls to accommodate others, even if it means suppressing their own needs and desires. They should be nice and never

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hurt anyone's feelings. They should be modest, which means downplaying what they're good at. Above all, they should be likable and agreeable.

So, they're entering adulthood with all of that on their shoulders, and they become the ones who manage relationships and manage other people's feelings. So, I was talking before about that, we don't necessarily raise them with a healthy sense of entitlement. And I have a whole chapter on this healthy entitlement. And I outline five, I think, important voices that girls need help cultivating and one is integrity. So, we want to help them trade the need to be liked for being respected.

The voice of resistance, tolerate their anger and bad attitudes. Doesn't mean tolerating rudeness, but they are full of chaotic feelings and we need to be able to tolerate it because we do tolerate anger in boys, but we do not tolerate it in girls. Ambition, help them tolerate competition and envy, which are feelings that girls often avoid for the sake of relationships. Well, I'll just keep going and we'll get back to that in a second.

A voice of authority, teach them to be proud of their skill and their authority. Too much humility, not a good thing. And then finally, the last one was economic self-sufficiency, which we covered.

Kara: So, I find that I often feel, I'm assuming if I experience this, other listeners do too, that for those of us who do feel aware of this. I often sometimes feel like I'm trying to figure out some kind of balance between validation and not wanting, especially my stepdaughter, like as you say, too much humility is not a good thing. But then I feel this struggle of, well, does it ever make sense to point out when something could be better or hasn't been done thoroughly, or a skill could be improved? I feel a kind of tension there.

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The advice I've heard elsewhere has sort of been, "Listen, middle school and adolescence does a number on girls' self-esteem. So better your daughter go into that period with as much as possible, even if it's unfounded, than try to moderate it at all. But I'm curious, I mean, I came from a very, what's the right word to say, high expectations, Jewish household. So that's one extreme maybe.

But then I think I do and I've had clients with this too, feel some tension between those, how do I encourage my child to excel? Which sometimes does include recognizing places that they aren't yet excellent at something, or do need some practice or there is some improvement to be made.

Jo-Ann: I mean, I think you're talking about parenting. We're not going to do away with all parenting and just give complete praise for everything.

Kara: I think some people think that's what parenting is supposed to be now, though. I mean, that's not an exaggeration of some of what's out there, I think.

Jo-Ann: Of course, if you've asked them to clean up their room and they took everything and shoved it into a giant pile in their closet. That's never happened with my daughter.

Kara: Hypothetically, just a hypothetical thing that could happen.

Jo-Ann: Hypothetically. I personally think it's absolutely fine to show some disappointment or disapproval now and again. I think that the feminist parenting piece comes in a lot around the objectification and the sexualization that they're getting everywhere else in the world. And so, for instance, in that case, we just don't want to comment on their appearance almost at all, or we at least want to notice that we're doing it far more than we do with their brothers.

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Or we're teasing them about boys before they even know what a crush is. Or we're noticing when we are asking, we come home with the groceries and we ask their brothers to help bring them in and not them because we have this sense that they are just more physically fragile.

Kara: I think about that in my relationship because my partner does all of the heavy lifting and stuff, but he also does all of the dishes and I make the money. So, I feel we're at least getting a balanced perspective. But let's talk about the boys for a minute, because obviously, plenty of people are raising boys. And I think that's also an area I hear a lot of feminist women think about and actually talk about, "How do I raise a feminist boy in this world and what does that look like?" So, I'm curious, I know your book more focuses on girls, but if you have thoughts about that as well.

Jo-Ann: Yeah, I absolutely do and I have a whole section on boys too. I just couldn't not. We hear so much more about the effects of bias and stereotypes on girls than on boys because girls are the ones who have been marginalized, who have less safety, autonomy and opportunity. But boys suffer too because of masculine stereotypes. So, what I have come to understand is that we need to raise boys differently, not just to protect our daughters, but to protect our sons too.

My male patients, they struggle with so many of the same issues as my female ones, anxiety, self-esteem, friendships, romance, identity, depression, feeling misunderstood. But unlike girls and women who often disclose problems to close friends or families or a family, a teenage boy or grown man is often confiding in me before anyone else. So, we have to make being emotional and cooperative, okay, and not emasculating. And there's so many ways that we unconsciously do this.

Without even knowing it we use more achievement related language with boys, like proud, win and best. But with our daughters, with girls, we sing

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more and are more vocal about emotions. So whatever small differences exist between boys and girls, research shows that unconsciously we widen that gap. And the other sort of last piece I'll say about that is, I think helping boys understand, I mean, I will say starting, we can't villainize boys. I think that boys more and more are feeling villainized since Me Too. But they're still so young and they don't understand the concepts behind it and the history behind it.

So, it's incumbent on us as parents to help them understand that girls have had less choices than them. That they can walk down the street and basically are free to do whatever they want, wear whatever they want, and nothing bad will happen. And it's much more common that something bad will happen to a girl and then she will be blamed for it and she will be asked what she was wearing. I don't think boys understand just how vigilant girls have to be. So, we are sort of educating our sons as much as our daughters about sexism in as many direct ways as we can.

Kara: And yeah, I'd love to talk a little bit as we bring it together of how to talk to your kids about these issues because talking about sexism, patriarchy, oppression, victim blaming, those are big topics. And I think it can feel hard for parents to know when do you start talking about that stuff. How do you start talking about that stuff? And so, I'm curious if you have any kind of guidance or advice for parents in terms of how to think about age appropriate kind of conversations?

Jo-Ann: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, there's tons of that in the book. The last three chapters are about sex and sexuality and consent. And so, I would say we can start from the time they're very young, teaching them about consent, which I'm sure your listeners all know a lot about. But even before they're verbal, you can just tell them what we're doing with their bodies. I'm going to pick you up now. I'm going to put you in the bath now.

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And then when it comes to talking about sexism, it's tricky. I was much more hesitant to talk about sexism with my daughter than with my son because I did not want her to feel like a victim. I didn't want her to lose confidence.

Kara: Right. You don't want to inculcate the person to be like, "Okay, so the world is against you and you are going to be oppressed and bad things are about to happen to you." But then you also don't want to send them out like Pollyanna without any awareness.

Jo-Ann: Exactly. We feel like we're between a rock and a hard place because we want to prepare them without instilling fear. So honestly, there are endless teachable moments where you can do that. And in the book I talk about how I first introduced sexism to my daughter. She was about six years old, and we were watching Master Chef Junior. And the first season she was like, "I want the girl to win. I think the girl's going to win." And then there was not a girl winner for several seasons. And we were watching it on the reruns of it or whatever so, we were going through it faster. We were watching as a family.

And each season I could see she was losing hope. And I was like, "What am I doing? She is screaming, she is asking, "What is going on here?"" And so, I could start to say, "Well, let's look at the judges. They're all men and it doesn't mean that they're necessarily doing something bad against the girls, but they identify with the boys." And we can hear that they identify with the boys because look what they're saying. They would say to the boys, "Wow, this is incredible. I can't wait to see your restaurant when you get older."

And with the girls, they'd say, "Well, this is incredible. Do you think you could do it again, or was it a fluke?" And then you wonder why every single person who walks into my office ...

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Kara: Right, thinks their accomplishments were an accident and they just got lucky or somebody was just being nice to them. I talk about this all the time that women take so much responsibility for anything that goes wrong. But anything that goes right or a success, it was a fluke, someone's being nice to me, it wasn't that hard, I just worked hard.

Jo-Ann: So, I think in all of those ways we are sort of honing their sexism detectors so that they can detect it when they're out in the world before they internalize it. And like I said, we can say what's really confusing about it is you don't always know if it's happening. So just like a smoke detector, you only want it to go off when it's actually happening.

But we need to teach girls deep down in their gut to know that this does happen and to be aware that often it is not them. They are not being interrupted because they don't have anything important to say. They are being interrupted because statistically speaking girls are more interrupted than boys are.

Kara: Yeah, that makes sense. And as you were talking, I'm thinking from the mindset perspective, part of the thing that makes me hesitant is not wanting to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. So, putting it in that context of, this may happen, you won't always even know if it's happening. But the most important thing is, what you think about yourself and you not giving up and you not letting the judges on Junior Chef convince you that you can't be a restaurateur if you want or you can't whatever. Yeah, so good.

So, people should obviously go buy the book, which is out now, so available anywhere books are sold.

Jo-Ann: Anywhere books are sold.

Kara: Where else can people find you, follow your work?

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Jo-Ann: Yeah, I have a newsletter on Substack, so that's [joannfinkelstein.substack.com](http://joannfinkelstein.substack.com). And you can find everything on my website which is [joanninkelstein.com](http://joanninkelstein.com). And I'm on Instagram [@joannfinkelstein.phd](https://www.instagram.com/joannfinkelstein.phd).

Kara: Awesome. We'll put all of that in the show notes in case people want to know how to spell your name, all that stuff. Thank you so much for writing this book. I'm going to obviously go order a copy, and for sharing your wisdom with us today.

Jo-Ann: Thank you for this wonderful podcast and your incredible book.

If you're loving what you're learning on the podcast, you have got to come check out the Feminist Self Help Society. It's our newly revamped community and classroom where you get individual help to better apply these concepts to your life, along with a library of next level blow your mind, coaching tools and concepts that I just can't fit in a podcast episode.

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