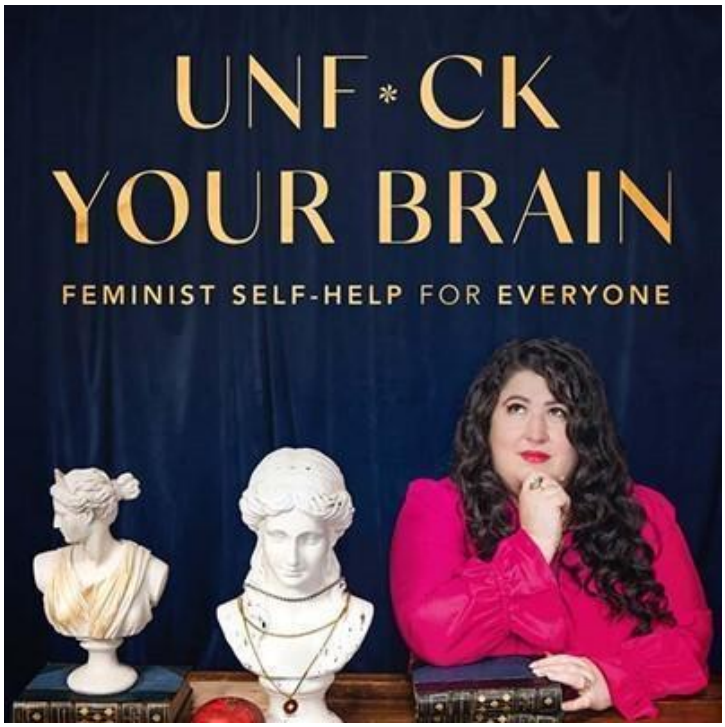
# UFYB 548: Thanks, Brain! When Your Kids Prefer the Other Parent




## Full Episode Transcript

**With Your Host**

## Kara Loewentheil

UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil

# UFYB 548: Thanks, Brain! When Your Kids Prefer the Other Parent

Kara: I'm Kara Loewentheil.

Rachel: And I'm Rachel Hart. We are master certified coaches and best friends.

Kara: And this is Thanks, Brain, a podcast about the mess in your head and how two real women try and sometimes fail to clean up their own.

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.

Yeah, now I'm like, are we, are we doing banter? How do you go? Are we doing banter? Should we? Hello, I'm a robot. I think this should be part of it. We don't need to cut this out.

Alright. I'm like, banter? Is it banter time? Is it banter? Let's banter. What should we banter about?

Rachel: Yeah, what do we banter about?

Kara: Why don't you start telling me about your self-coaching and I'm sure the banter will come.

Rachel: Okay. So, right. Last time we talked about how my brain offered a thought really quickly in the moment. So I wanted to share something about a topic that has been months and months and months of me needing to coach myself on because sometimes that also happens. So, I have two boys. They're four and eight. They are really into my husband. Like they, we went out to a breakfast restaurant that we go out to most weekends and they have these, you know, booths that you can sit in and the booths are huge and it's me alone in a booth by myself and my husband squished with like both boys on either side of him.

# UFYB 548: Thanks, Brain! When Your Kids Prefer the Other Parent

You know, if we ever take two cars places, they want to ride with their dad. They don't want to ride with me. And I mean, you have heard, you have gotten a lot of text messages about this. But there's a lot of like, no, I want Papa. I don't want you. I want him. And this has been going on for a long time and I have not been chill about it.

Kara: As I, I can't believe that, Rachel.

Rachel: Yeah, I know. It's so hard to believe. No, I have been really angry about it. Obviously there's a lot of hurt underneath the anger, but I think that anger has just, that has been the place where I have landed and I have wanted to stay and I stayed in for a very long time about how it was just like really unfair and it was somehow in my mind it was like additionally unfair because I felt like more of the parenting and household duties fell to me and yet I was constantly being rejected by my kids.

Kara: He's the guest star.

Rachel: Yeah, exactly. Like I, like have you noticed what mama is doing around here? Like as if…

Kara: The answer to that is no. Four-year-old, eight-year-old, 13-year-olds, they do not notice those things.

Rachel: No. But also like the idea that I had created this kind of scorecard in my head that I was supposed to be rewarded with more affection because I was doing more laundry.

Kara: That's what they always say about small children. They're very aware of household duties and they reward you proportionally for your caretaking.

Rachel: I mean, they should.

# UFYB 548: Thanks, Brain! When Your Kids Prefer the Other Parent

Kara: They should. Listen, I will sign that petition, but… I think that my stepkids probably think the laundry just does itself. I mean, it's like magic, who knows?

Rachel: I really just also like the idea of handing a petition to my four-year-old and eight-year-old being like, listen, all the other moms signed on board, right? Like, and this is going to convince you.

Kara: And your four-year-old's like, I actually can't read, but thank you for this.

Rachel: Yeah, he's like, can I sign? Um, okay, so anyways, so much of my own self-coaching on this, I think has been trying to convince me that my kids do love me and that when they choose their dad, when they want to sit next to him, when they, you know, when they have these moments of saying, no, not you, I want him, that I was still loved. And I will tell you that did not work. Not, I mean like intellectually, I am totally on board that of course my children love me, right? And I have a lot of evidence for that. But in the moment when they were choosing, when they were saying, no, I don't want to sit next to you. I don't want to ride in the car with you. I want him. I don't want you.

I would just kind of spiral, right? It would just, it just didn't, none of the kind of like intellectual evidence that I had worked at all.

Kara: It's so also just like with kids are so brutal, right? It's like the thing we always fear is that what someone's thinking is like, I don't want you, I don't love you, I like them more than you. But it goes unsaid for adults where like reading into between the lines. But kids are actually like, no, here's your greatest fear and the thought you worry about the most other people having about you. Let me just say it out loud like 12 times a day to your face.

Rachel: Yeah, pretty much. Uh, so I tried that route. It didn't work. I also tried, and, you know, a lot of my, a lot of people in my life would say like,

oh, it's just a phase, right? Like, the kids are going through a phase. All kids go through a phase. Like, so I, I tried this kind of like, I just need to wait them out. Like the tides are going to turn and I am going to be the one that they want.

Kara: I will win eventually.

Rachel: Like, I'm gonna win. It's gonna be me. They're gonna want to sit next to me at breakfast. They're gonna want to ride in the car with me. Yeah. Um, and it like, surprisingly, that did not work either in those moments.

Kara: It’s weird.

Rachel: It's weird. It’s weird. Yeah. Because I was just like, it was like I had, I had set this clock, right? So I had set this.

Kara: Right. And then you’re always like, oh, is it time yet? Is it time yet? Is it time yet?

Rachel: It was not time and I was so sure like this had been going on for too long, right? It just like, it should have changed by now. So.

Kara: I love what we do that. We're like, I'm willing to put up with this for three and a half business days. Like I feel like this is this comes up in coaching so much. I'm sure you have this with your clients where somebody's like working on a goal or whatever and they're like, I know I need to be uncomfortable and okay with failure, but it should have happened. It's like, I'm willing to do that for five to seven days. I'm willing to do that for six weeks. Like there's an internal clock and whatever. I feel like that's such a good point about like why that kind of coaching doesn't work that well because if you tell your brain like, okay, the end is coming, then your brain's just like, is it the end now? Is it the end now? Is it the end now? Is it the end now? Is it the end now? Is it the end now? Like it's just like.

But it's, right, but that is like, I feel like that is kind of the standard advice around like kids choosing one parent over the other. I had also a lot of friends try to be like, oh, but I bet, like I bet when your kids get hurt, they want you. Like I and I was like, nope.

Kara: That is the danger with saying I bet X to people. It's like the answer might just be like, nope.

Rachel: Yeah, it's just like, no, they still want their father. And this was going on for months, right? Because part of me, I think didn't also want to not be angry about it. I think that was, like I wanted to, I felt angry about it. I was bringing other, I was bringing other things that were happening in the relationship around like household duties and chores. Like I was kind of using that as again, some sort of evidence for why this shouldn't be happening. But the thing that actually worked for me and again, like this was coaching that I was doing, you know, on myself over many months, um, was really just starting to question like, why my kids shouldn't have preferences.

Like, if preferences are this totally human thing, right? Like human, if humans are given choices, we have preferences. Like we prefer certain foods and we prefer certain colors and we prefer certain climates and we prefer certain people. And like if we're, when we're faced with a bunch of choices, we make a choice based in that moment, based on what our preference is. Like I, I think there was this, this exception that my brain had been making that like preferences are this normal thing that of course everyone has preferences around lots of things, but in this situation, there should not be a preference. Like my children should be a preference for you. Right.

You would have been okay with a preference for you. Or, well, I mean, here's the thing, the place where I came up with it was like part of my brain was like, yeah, but it should just be 50-50. Like it should just be an even

split, which was like, but like where does that, like where do I even find, how would you even measure that? What is that? How would you even measure that? But where also how would you measure it, but also like imagine if I kind of said like, okay, they can have a preference, like sometimes they can choose him and sometimes they can choose me, but like when we tally it up at the end of the day, it has to be 50-50. It would just have my brain constantly scanning all the time to be like, I don't know, like he's at 35, right? And I'm at 15.

So we better like make up some preference over here. But it, it was actually really, it was really kind of helpful for me. And I think it again, it kind of scrambled my brain this idea that preferences are normal and the idea that preferences should, should be like 50-50 when it comes to parents. Like that doesn't really make sense. And the, the piece where sometimes I find what really helps is to go to like the extreme version of it. And so I went to the place of like, okay, like what if my husband is always a preferred parent? Preferred in the sense of like, they're going to choose to do an activity with him, they're going to choose to sit next to him. Like what if he's always a preferred parent, can I be okay with that?

And to just like let my brain go there. And I, like there was something actually quite freeing about like letting myself go there and like what would that mean? Like what would that mean if I, um, if I felt kind of solid and grounded enough that I could watch them, I could watch them essentially have a preference about who they wanted to be with and who they wanted to sit next to and not make it mean something about whether or not I mattered to them or whether or not, whether or not they loved me. Like I was, I was attaching so much.

Kara: Yeah, you were like connecting those things. That's like that preference of who you want to sit next to equals who you love.

Rachel: Yeah, exactly. Like it's, like it, it and like of course like preference and love are not the same thing because also sometimes I prefer not to be around my children. Right. Like sometimes if, sometimes if given the choice, like I think about it at the, at the end of the day, my eight-year-old often comes downstairs after we've like done the whole tuck in and then he wants to do like a second snuggle on the couch. And sometimes I prefer like, I like, no, like day is done, right? Like.

Kara: I'm off the clock. Go to bed.

Rachel: But it has nothing to do with my affection or attachment. It's just like in that moment, the thing that I am craving so much is to not, you know, like be by myself. And so I don't know, like it was very, it was very just kind of like wild for me to let my brain go to that place of like, well, what if he's just always a preferred parent and that's not a bad thing and that doesn't mean anything about the like, it doesn't mean anything about like the strength of their attachment to me.

Like preference is not also rejection. I think I, I don't know, I had this moment of like, well, what if like I'm, what if what if I'm spaghetti and my husband is a hamburger, right? And they both, they both like spaghetti and hamburgers, right? But, you know, what if like more times than not, they would choose having a hamburger over spaghetti. Right? Like there was, like sometimes going to that kind of ridiculous place with it. I don't know if that like ever helps or like if you ever find that like going to that ridiculous place actually can unlock something for you.

Kara: Yeah. I just love, part of what I love so much about this is like you're getting at the heart of what I feel like is so much of the coaching that you have to do with parents and as a step parent myself and you is like, your children are autonomous human beings. Right? It's like you have children and then you're like, but here's how they should behave. Here's how they should feel. Here's how they should act and like society acts like that's

normal and to be expected. Right? And like the really insane thing about having children is that you are basically choosing a person on the earth to live with without ever having met them.

Like they're just a person. I mean, of course you can influence them with nurture, although, you know, I think sometimes I feel like, well, you can definitely mess them up. I don't know how much you can like shape them into what you want, right? It's like anybody who has more than one child knows that their personalities and temperaments and dispositions can be like are like radically different from birth often. And I, but it is such a like, we cause so much suffering for ourselves by believing, right? Like it should be this way, it should be equal, or it should be the mother, or it should be whatever my kid, like having that sort of, I don't know, I just, I feel like the way that we're socialized to think about children and parenthood and child rearing, like reinforces this idea that you like should have more control or more predictability or something over your children as though they're, they're just like not full people.

Rachel: Yeah. I mean, I listen, I also like went down some like weird boy mom hole, right? Like where it was just like, oh, you know, like the boys just love their mother so much. Like it was this, it was just like to watch my brain do all these things where it's basically like, listen, number one, it's owed to me because look at this, look at everything.

Kara: Look at the laundry. Look at how much laundry.

Rachel: Look at the laundry. Like who, who else has done laundry around here? Like in months, anybody, anybody? Like, so it's owed for, you know, it's owed to me. There was something like, I think also from, this is another, like this was another thing for me too to, to recognize like, I am 45, I'm going to be 46. I still have versions of this fight with my mom that I've been having since I was a kid where we will start arguing and she will start saying things like you've, you always choose your father. Right?

# UFYB 548: Thanks, Brain! When Your Kids Prefer the Other Parent

Kara: So you were like primed to look for this.

Rachel: Totally. Like you've always liked him more. And to be, it's so funny, right? That like it took me like no part of me recognized like, oh, I've actually been in the position of the child who is like, I love this parent and the parent can't take it in, right? Because essentially like saying that you like having a preference, saying like, I want to ride in the car with dad instead of mom becomes this like huge rejection of the parent rather than just like dad is a more chill driver.

Kara: That is definitely true. Just on a you and your husband basis, not a gender basis, just on a specific individual basis.

Rachel: Yeah, and but it was like also true for me growing up, right? Like that was, like that was also just like, yeah, I just, so I don't know, it's like this funny thing sometimes that I, I think with, I think when we're doing the, the coaching work, sometimes there's like this expectation of like, oh, I've been doing this for a while, therefore I should be able to kind of like see the problem and flip the thought really quickly. And sometimes you have to, it's like you have to let it marinate. I think there was a part of me that needed myself, like I needed to feel angry because that was also about kind of like other separate things that had gotten mixed into like this place that I was spiraling.

Um, I think it was also like I was feeling really angry and maybe not letting myself feel the hurt. Now, I was feeling the hurt because I wasn't treating it like a preference. I was treating it like this is an indication of like how much they love me versus how much they love their father. But it and to also see a lot of times like the attempts that you try, right? Trying to convince myself, no, they love me just as much or it's a phase and they're just going to grow out of it. Like that wasn't, like those avenues didn't actually prove to be useful. What was useful was to be like, what if he's always a preferred parent?

Kara: Right. Because I think anytime you're like, oh, they'll grow out of it. It's over. It's like you're still taking for granted that it's bad and a problem. Yeah. Right. And you're not the danger or whatever. Right. And then it's just like, oh, well, it won't be dangerous for that much longer. But like your brain is like that doesn't, that does not compute. It's just also so interesting to notice how we like, you know, that like whatever our, our own preconception, like whatever our own kind of thought patterns we have in other areas of our life are, we just bring them in like to our kids.

But you now, I mean, what's so great about that self-coaching is also like now, you know, when your kids get married and they want to, whatever, defer to their partner's wishes over yours or something. Like you're going to have already done this work. Like so many people kind of lose it, right, when their kid like gets partnered, brings someone else into the family, has other priorities, like isn't always choosing the original nuclear family. I feel like you're going to be like a step ahead because you already did this.

Rachel: I honestly say it was like really wild to, to watch them make choices now and it's just like, okay, like that's not, it's not a reflection of, it's not a reflection of how they feel about me. It's not something that I have to wait for them to grow out of this phase. And it's also wild to see like how long I was in it, unable to be like, oh, I actually used to be in the child's shoes where like, and still am, right? Like to know what it is to be on the receiving end of a parent who feels like this, you know, this preference exists or child doesn't like them as much and how frustrating that is as a kid to be like, no, I, like it's very frustrating to be like, I love you.

Right? Like I just wanted to drive with this person. Yeah, I love you. Yeah. And also there are times, you know, there are times when like, yeah, there are times when I go to dad and there are times when I go to my mom, but it's sometimes like, you know, it's hard to even see that if like it was hard for me to see the times that my kids would be choosing me because I was so

locked into like, no, they, they only like their father, they always want their father, they never want me. It's so unfair. Like woe is me. Yeah.

Kara: Yeah, I'll have to do a whole other episode on like, I mean, this like this, you can imagine for step-parent life, this is like this up 10 notches because like, because like the kids have, you know, there's like kids naturally feel like conflict and guilt, but then they're attached to everybody. It's just like a whole situation. But, um, let me share a thanks brain that my brain did today, actually on the way here, which I, I had a whole other one planned out, but then this one I just loved because it was so unbidden and perfect. So every time that I have to get ready to come and film, I like have to like get up and get my hair done, get my makeup done, like the whole thing. And I always experience this sort of like this feeling that I've been identifying mentally as sort of like dread.

And I've been associating with like with demand avoidance and like not sort of feeling like, oh, this is this obligation that I have to go to. Right. I've like structured my life to be very flexible. It's rare that I like have to go do something. And I mean, I, you know, I have like coaching calls on my calendar that I wouldn't just not do, but even so that's like an hour, you're still at home, you can take a This is like, okay, I gotta go to the place, whatever.

So I, I have always, I always feel this like kind of sinking feeling and I've always identified that as like dread demand avoidance, told myself it's because this like takes so much out of me. And then this morning, it was like that feeling started descending. And then my brain was just like, or maybe you're just kind of like powering down because you have to perform later and you're just conserving your energy. And I was like, oh, that's a much better explanation. I like that one a lot better.

But it was like such a like completely changed. It felt equally like true, right? And I, it just felt like it like completely changed how I experienced that

feeling in my body. And it was such a good example that like sometimes self-coaching is not about changing the emotion. Like the actual physical sensation in my body either way was sort of like a kind of like little bit shut down, like low energy, sort of like, but thinking about it as identifying it and calling it like, oh, this is dread versus identifying and calling it, oh, this is just like conserving energy before the big, like because my brain was like, what if you were like a singer or an actress and you just like this is always what you were like in the green room before the show.

Like, you know, and all your people just knew like, oh, before a performance, she doesn't want to talk to anybody and she just is like kind of hunkered down and she's like pulling all her resources so that she can then go on and give this big show. And that feels so much better than telling myself it's dread. It was such a good example of why when we're, at least when I'm teaching people in the beginning to coach themselves, I'm often like encouraging them to not even put a name to the emotion, like just put the sensations in that like when you're trying to figure out a feeling, like just describe the sensations because just the label or the story we tell ourselves about what emotion we're experiencing creates its own whole reaction.

Rachel: Oh yeah. I mean, I, one of my favorite thoughts that I use all the time instead of saying like, this is anxiety, I will say this is what, this is what adrenaline and cortisol feel like in the body or like this is what stress hormones feel like. Because I have like a whole story about anxiety, right? Like just and it's like dread. It's like who's going around being like, well, that's the emotion I want to feel most today is dread.

Kara: Right. And like you feel adrenaline and cortisol before your wedding, which is an exciting time.

Rachel: Yeah, exactly. And also, I mean, for me, there was something again, because I have the story of like, I have too much anxiety and I have

more anxiety than most people and right, all this additional belief around how my anxiety is a problem. Like it's, I can also then turn around with, oh, this is just stress hormones. It's like, well, everybody has stress hormones, right? Like everybody has stress hormones. We all feel them in our bodies sometime and it really, I mean, you should see me driving around the streets of San Francisco and I am so often being like, this is what, this is what adrenaline and cortisol feel like in the human body.

Kara: I feel like you should have a little ditty, like a little song you can sing to yourself.

Rachel: Oh my god. Yeah. Listen.

Kara: Adrenaline and cortisol. It's those are long words. Those hormones should have shorter names. But this, but the beautiful thing is I have so little story or meaning attached to them, right? Like I think that's why that's like that's why it works so well. I love, I like I love that idea of like, I'm just powering down, right? Because I'm just about to.

Kara: I'm just conserving resources. Yeah, I'm just like.

Rachel: Conserving resources for my big performance.

Kara: Pulling them all together before I got to come out here and perform.

Rachel: Yeah, it's like Celine Dion or I remember watching, right, like not singing before a show or right? It's just like.

Kara: Yeah, the talent needs to rest before it's time before the performing pony goes on.

Rachel: When did you turn into a pony in that?

Kara: I always call myself the performing pony when I'm like when I have to when I have to like go on stage or I do these, these a little bit less, but

especially when I have to go on stage because it is for me, it's like a real, you know, I'm not like a very, I don't think of, I mean, some people are going to laugh. I don't think of myself as a performative person. Like I never wanted, I was never a little kid who was like, I want to do skits and everybody watch, you know, like I don't and it, it doesn't, it's not like my natural mode. It is like, I turn it on. So I call it being a performing pony. It's like.

Rachel: You just held the room as like a four-year-old like on doing your dissertation on like little women and like what it meant to you. That was your, that was your performance.

Kara: That's possibly true. That's more, that's true. That's fair. Maybe I'm more performative. It's more of an intellectual performance.

Rachel: It's I guess I'm, yeah, maybe, maybe all performers feel this way. So maybe it's not, maybe I am a performer. See, I'm already this is blowing my mind. This is why I'm always thankful for your brain.

And I'm thankful for yours. Talk to you guys next time.