



# ASK Jane

In the spirit of our founder, Jane Addams, we present a question each month centering on how teachers, parents, and other adults can help children overcome trauma, create positive relationships, and strengthen their ability to learn and heal, especially for a month with Valentine's Day in it. If you have a question you'd like to ask (in confidence, of course), please send an email to [askjane@jpachicago.org](mailto:askjane@jpachicago.org).

**Q:** Dear Jane, I enjoy good relationships with both my children, ages 5 and 8, but I wonder how I can strengthen those connections as they grow older. I want to be sure they know they can come to me whenever they need to.

*Mr. C. P.*

**A:** I'm glad you and your children are close; you must be a thoughtful and loving parent. Your question seems especially appropriate for Valentine's Day.

Essentially, your relationship with them is at their very core. In their early years, you're everything to them; they thrive in the daily give and take. Through this primary connection, children learn relationships can bring joy, and they're building the basis for future connections to others through their connections to you. A healthy parent-child bond helps children feel secure, valued and loved, giving them a stable platform from which to enter the world at large.

Your children's relationship with you demonstrates the world can be a good place. They develop trust in you, their world, and themselves. They believe they're worthy beings because you provide the warm, responsive, and predictable nurturing they require to thrive.

Parents are young children's first teachers. You guide their behavior, helping them learn right

from wrong. They're eager to learn from you even when you don't realize it. Children watch what you do and often copy it, soaking up your values. They want to please you – well, at least most of the time! And they value your opinion. Being calm and thoughtful even in tense situations helps them learn to manage their feelings without being overwhelmed by them. Keep your communication open and stay responsive to their questions and concerns. If you take them seriously when they're young, they'll be more apt to come to you with more significant issues later.

Kindergarteners/school-aged children are learning how to get along with peers and authority figures other than parents. They need you to help make sense of things. They're very concerned with fairness, for example. As their moral development takes form, they may experience guilt if they violate your values. They understand better how their behavior affects others, and increased reasoning abilities allow them to see alternatives to their actions. Take time at the end of each day to review it and if there were rough spots, plan together how to have a better day tomorrow.

In the teen years, your relationship will naturally evolve. While they still want to please their parents, they also want more independence and control.

You'll need to balance meeting developmental needs for autonomy while still being responsible for their growth and security.

It's important not to over-personalize teens' behavior. They may "hate" you when they're really angry about something else--a bad grade, a romantic misstep, or an argument with a friend. Teens need home to be a safe place where they can unwind from the pressures of the outside world. Don't respond to anger with anger but

calmly seek its source. If we have positive relationships with our children, our opinions will matter, and we will have a more significant influence on their beliefs and decisions.

Through your parent-child relationship, you provide a secure base to help them grow and flourish. Not only will your child reap the benefits of this relationship, so will you!

Most sincerely,

Jane

JPA

## **We strengthen our parent-child relationships when we:**

- Provide focused time and attention (i.e., no glancing at phones or TV during a conversation)
- Enjoy positive interactions together (outings, game nights, etc.)
- Show warmth, affection, and love in large & small ways
- Accept who they are
- Accept their feelings, even if not all their behaviors
- Offer unconditional love
- Encourage and believe in them
- Follow their interests and tune in to what they're doing
- Guide and teach them
- Are there for them