



# ASK Jane

This month's questions focus on issues of child abuse and prevention. Everyone has a part to play keeping children safe.

## **Q: How can I as a parent ensure that I maintain healthy disciplinary boundaries when I feel like my kids are out of control?**

Every parent's been there – that moment your stress level is through the roof and you just can't handle your kids' misbehavior any more. Your rational resources--asking nicely, instituting a timeout, making a no-TV threat--are exhausted. You just want to make your kids' arguing, whining, and carelessness stop.

Fantasies of a bubble bath or a night out watching football flash briefly through your mind, but then you're back in the kitchen trying to clean Spaghetti-Os off a previously clean floor.

In these moments, maybe you find yourself about to administer a good spanking or you pick up an object close at hand. You stop yourself – you don't want to go there – but you feel you've lost control and are unsure how to get it back.

### **You Are Not Alone**

First things first: Know you're not alone. All parents feel this way at some time. Suddenly, your children seem like little strangers over whom you have no control. It's frustrating when they

don't behave as you expect them to. Your feelings are valid and common.

Next, take a few deep breaths. Step back and reassess the situation. Is your reaction about what's happening with your child or are you reacting to something that happened to you earlier?

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**“ ...when children misbehave, it's because they need a supportive adult... ”**

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In other words, who or what is really making you angry? Is your reaction proportional to the situation? A multitude of factors can be at play here – relationship or money problems, work deadlines or conflicts, and

other adult business.

Take a moment to calm yourself and explore the whole of what you're reacting to. Doing so lessens the impulse to lash out.

### **Defusing Anger**

No matter what the provocation, remember it's never right to take things out on your children physically, mentally, or emotionally. As a parent, you need to protect them while modeling the behavior you hope to see. Try defusing your anger by leaving the room or even the house until you feel able to speak calmly. Walk around the block or to the park. Take a pillow with you and yell into it or even punch it a few times. Remember, they aren't doing things purposely

to anger you, especially if they're very young; they're just being children.

Once you feel in control of your anger, talk calmly to your children. Explain why you're feeling angry (age-appropriately, of course). If they've made a mess, make a game out of cleaning up. That will not only do what needs to be done in the moment but also show them how to do it in the future. If they've just been contrary, ask what's bothering them. They may have worries of their own they can't express verbally. Finding that out can lead to a good talk. See if you can agree about how to behave next time. Remind them to "use their words" instead of acting out. You can pleasantly surprise your children by sitting down and talking instead of coming at them physically or verbally.

### Creating Positive Experiences

Third, create positive family experiences when you're not under pressure. Go to the park, take a walk together, play a board game, go to the movies. Find ways to be together. Show interest in things that are important to them. Let your kids know these times are special to you and create them consistently and purposefully. Creating positive relationships actually makes children want to behave out of love for you.

Most of the time when children misbehave, it's because they need a supportive adult to show them how to behave properly. Children need to be taught boundaries, how to relate to others, and how to behave appropriately. It might seem that five-year-olds should be able to set the table correctly, but they may need guidance and practice before they can do it themselves.

Last, but certainly not least, attend to your own mental health. Whether this means asking a trusted family member to take the kids for a night, setting up a date night with your significant other or friends, or scheduling some "me" time to

nourish the part of you that isn't a parent – find time to nurture that.

Numerous resources are available to guide, and support you. See the partial list at the end of this column.

### Q: As a concerned adult, how can I help prevent child abuse?

Numerous ways exist to become involved, support families and children, and communicate support around this difficult issue.

#### As a Concerned Citizen...

Join a local organization that supports children and/or parents. (See the resource list at the end of this question.) Volunteer at or donate to organizations that support healthy families, such as the YM/YWCA, a local shelter or food pantry. Supporting families in multiple ways helps parents who need opportunities to de-stress.

Mentor a child who needs additional support academically or socially. Being a consistent positive presence for children outside the family can help them and the family cope with many difficulties. Get involved in local politics or attend a talk about this issue at a nearby university or non-profit organization. Also

consider how what you learn affects your own parenting philosophy — how can you promote healthy and flourishing relationships in your own home?

#### As an Educator...

Build strong, healthy relationships with families to minimize abusive behavior in the home. (Remember, as a mandated reporter, educators are required to report suspicions of abuse they see to the appropriate authorities.)

How have you best accomplished this in the past? Can you highlight positive behavior in addition to negative behavior when calling home? Can you discuss a student's tough day

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at school in a way that avoids blaming/shaming a parent? How might you align with parents around supporting students so they don't become defensive when you call home?

You might even include them in your thinking about how to support students when they seem to go off track. This relationship building enhances your goal of supporting your students.

### Final Note...

Regardless of who you are, if you see or suspect child abuse—physical, verbal, or sexual—you should contact the Illinois Department of Children & Family Services child abuse hotline, 1-800-25-ABUSE (1-800-252-2873) right away. If a child is in immediate danger, also call 911. Outside of Illinois, call 1-800-422-4453. We are all responsible for keeping children safe.

Many resources specifically discuss healthy relationships and boundaries in child-appropriate language. Some resources a parent could read to and begin to talk about with their children are:

***No Trespassing — This Is MY Body!***: Pattie Fitzgerald

***My Body is Private***: Linda Girard

***I Said No! A Kid-to-Kid Guide to Keeping Private Parts Private***: Kimberly King, Zack King

***Your Body Belongs to You***: Cornelia Spelman

***No More Secrets: Protecting Your Child from Sexual Assault***: Caren Adams and Jennifer Fay (1981)

***The Safe Child Book: A Commonsense Approach to Protecting Children and Teaching Children to Protect Themselves***: Sherryll Kraizer (1996) Effective, non-threatening techniques

***Play It Safe***: Kathleen Sharar Kyte (1983) Advice for protecting your home, property, and body from robbery, assault, and other crimes.

***No-No the Little Seal***: Judith Feldman (1986) A young seal is upset when his uncle starts touching his body in private places, until he finds the courage to tell. Level: baby-preschool

***Something Happened and I'm Scared to Tell: A Book for Young Victims of Abuse***: Patricia Kehoe (1987) Helps shift the blame from the victim to the perpetrator, a crucial message. Available in English and Spanish.

***Loving Touches***: Lory Freeman (1986) Tool to reach children about the need for loving, nurturing touches as well as the prevention of harmful touches Level: ages 4-8

***Telling Isn't Tattling***: Kathryn M. Hammerseng (1995) Encourages kids to think about how to handle minor irritations and potentially dangerous situations. Level: ages 4-8

***The Trouble with Secrets***: Karen Johnson (1986) Helps young children understand the difference between secrets to be kept and those that are not. Available in English and Spanish.

### Other Resources:

[Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Child Abuse Prevention Month](#)

[Resource list from National Runaway Safeline Prevent Child Abuse America](#)

[Child Welfare Information Gateway](#) connects child welfare and related professionals to comprehensive resources to strengthen communities and families around this issue.

A website with many additional resources for parents for an organization called [Darkness to Light: Ending Child Sexual Abuse; 5 Steps to Protecting Our Children](#) **JPA**





## Tips for Parents: Preventing Child Sexual Abuse

JPA therapist and consultant Katie Gleason, LCSW, conducts workshops with parents about early childhood sexuality and child sexual abuse prevention. She's provided some tips for caregivers here.

- **The best** protection is your good relationship with your children. Being able to come to you to get a clear answer makes all the difference.
- **Be proactive** in teaching personal safety and abuse prevention. Let them know they've control over who touches them and where.
- **Model** respectful boundaries when it comes to touch and affection with others.
- **Develop positive** and open communication around topics of sexuality and personal safety.
- **Discuss** private parts, teach their proper names, and say why they're private.
- **Define** "safe touch" vs. "unsafe touch"
- **Use** specific examples; don't be vague or diffident. Children need clear age-appropriate information.
- **Tell** your child some adults or older children could try to make them do something they feel uncomfortable doing, but that they can say "No. That makes me feel uncomfortable." Then leave and find a trusted adult to talk to.
- **Talk** to your children about "tricks" and "secrets." Remind them they can come to you, especially when someone asks them to keep secrets. Insist they tell you about any uncomfortable touching or if someone wants them to keep that touching secret.
- **Teach** your children to pay attention to their feelings. If they feel uncomfortable with any form of touch, even well-meaning hugs or kisses from trusted family, they should tell that person that they don't want to be touched that way.
- **Talk** with children about how they should respect others' bodies.
- **Talk** with your children every day about their relationships, activities and feelings. [JPA](#)