



ASK Jane

Q: A girl has taken to calling me “mom” in my classroom. What is that all about? Is it okay? How should I as her teacher respond? Should the administration be involved? What should I think about and do?

A: What Makes a “Mom”?

While at first the solution may seem complicated due to the emotional nature evoked by being called “mom,” it is actually pretty straightforward. It’s clear that this student has developed a positive attachment to you, and is showing it through using the affectionate title “mom.”

Now, whether this behavior signifies a healthy attachment where she feels safe sharing and learning with your guidance is unclear. It may be her way of complimenting you and acknowledging how important you are in her life.

She may also have ruptured attachments with primary caregivers at home and is looking for a safe adult to attach to. This can only be determined by speaking with her gently and privately.

First, it is important not to shun her or disapprove of her desire to connect with you. Displaying warm and welcoming signs of being approachable and open to communication is important in any teacher-student relationship. Teachers play a huge role shaping student success and self-image; it’s crucial that students feel accepted and welcomed into their classroom to be on a healthy track to both academic and emotional success.

Of course, this doesn’t mean you must blindly embrace and be comfortable with certain signs of affection such as hugging or a constant desire to be with you. Just as she has important reasons for bestowing the “mom” title, you have important reasons for maintaining healthy boundaries between you, and you are allowed to define these. In fact, it may be necessary for both your sakes to ensure that no misunderstandings can occur.

Some examples you might use to address this student might include: “It’s clear we have a close relationship, but I would feel most comfortable if you would call me Ms. B or Ms. Broderick. Is that OK?” **JPA**