



# 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. 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:** My 5-year old son likes to play with beads, jewelry, and other girl-related toys. Is that normal? What should I be doing or saying? My neighbor has a daughter the same age who likes trucks and is even a little aggressive. They sometimes play together and seem OK, but I worry about what people will think.

*Mrs. AT.*

**A:** Thank you for asking this important question. The short answer is “Yes,” it is normal. By the age of three, boys and girls are usually able to label themselves as either a boy or a girl. By the age of four most children have a stable sense of their gender identity. It is also at age four that children begin to categorize behavior as either “things boys do” or “things girls do.” For your son at age five to feel comfortable enough to play with beads, jewelry, and other girl-related toys that traditionally fit into the “things that girls do” category is actually a positive and healthy sign.

For a five-year-old to do what feels good to them, even if they are not “supposed” to, takes courage and positive self-concept. It suggests they’ll be able to overcome any external social consequences they may face. The same strength the five-year-old demonstrates would parallel an adolescent’s ability to overcome peer pressure to drink, join others in bullying another child, or many other challenges. There’s nothing you need to be doing or saying, except participating with and supporting your child in play. You’re already doing a great job!

One of the most critical parental tasks is to help your children develop a positive sense of who they are. What they play with at five years old may or may not reflect what they are interested in later in life. (You may have noticed that some department stores no longer separate toys into “boy” and “girl” sections.) However, children are incredibly perceptive and sensitive to their parents’ thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. It’s okay and natural as a parent to be worried about what others will think of your child or to be worried about your child yourself. But if you are struggling with your feelings about your child, then it may be beneficial to seek therapy or other parental supports.

When parents allow their worries to lead them to intervene in their child’s play, that’s when the potential for harm begins. Children may then start to feel ashamed, feel there is something wrong with them, or feel guilty about who they are.

One of the most important lessons we can teach our children is that we cannot please everyone. Instead of worrying about what people think, we can help our children develop a positive view of themselves, no matter what they like or who they are. That way, they will be prepared to overcome obstacles such as others judging them. The world will not change for our children. However, we can help our children be prepared to face the world.

JPA

Most sincerely,  
*Jane*