

## TALKING WITH KIDS

### Age by Age Insight

Learn how to talk to kids of any age. Listen through your children's ears and find out how much of your conversation kids really understand — and why they don't seem to pay attention when you want them to.

#### **Babies & Toddlers: Ages 0-2**

- [How They Communicate](#)

- **Crying is one of a baby's first ways of communicating through sound.** By the time a baby is four weeks old, her cries are differentiated. There is a unique cry for hunger, wetness, pain and missing companionship. Within a few months, babies also start to coo and gurgle with pleasure.
- **Within three to four months, babies realize that when they make noise, people respond.** When a parent or caregiver responds to a baby's cries, the baby begins to trust her means of communication, because her needs are being met. In the second six months of life, babies begin to babble in the language of their parents and other caregivers.
- **Babies and toddlers do not understand words out of context.** Instead, they understand words in combination with your gestures, tone and facial expression.
- **By 18-24 months, toddlers begin to use action words.** These words express what they see or want, leaving out adjectives and other grammatical conventions. They may come out with short phrases such as "Mommy go," or "Shoes on." Babies and toddlers also speak through gestures and tone of voice. What they do physically may be as important as what they actually say.
- **Toddlers use words and short sentences to assert themselves.** "No" and "mine" are used to claim space and take control of their new world. It is developmentally important for a toddler to say these words. When young children say "No" to parents, they are often saying "Yes" to themselves. Asserting their independence is an early, important step towards becoming their own person, separate from you.

- [How You Communicate](#)

- **Touch, cuddle and croon to babies as a first form of communication.** When babies cry, you can reassure them with your presence and a comforting, soothing tone. Babies respond to the emotions you are communicating through what they see, hear and feel. They react to your sadness, tension, happiness or satisfaction.
- **Be aware that tone and body language make a difference.** When a baby hears "Stop!" he will sometimes cry, because he is reacting to the sharpness and volume of your command. In the same way, a soft, loving "Good night" when you are tucking him into bed will comfort your child because of the soothing tone.
- **Stay physically connected as a way to communicate.** Babies like being close to their parents. Wearing or holding them next to your body communicates reassurance and comfort; a carrier also allows you to move around and carry on with your life.
- **Don't be surprised if your baby cries when you are on the phone.** A baby knows when you are not paying attention, and he knows how to get that attention back. His wailing can come at inconvenient times, but being aware of what's causing your baby's reactions may help you stay patient and deal with him in the moment.
- **Turn baby talk into a two-way conversation.** Invite responses from your baby. Singing and chanting nursery rhymes are good ways to play with sound. They invite your baby to make a pleasing stream of sounds that eventually lead to talking.

- **Extend sounds and words to help children develop language skills.** If your toddler says "Go home," you might extend his thought by saying, "You want to go home. We can leave in a few minutes."
- **Even if you are not sure how much your child understands, talk anyway!** Like holding and kissing, words are an important way of staying in contact with your baby. They will help your baby begin to attach feelings and thoughts to sounds.

## **Pre-schoolers 2-5yrs old How They Communicate**

**Between ages two and three, many preschoolers begin to use more complicated sentences.** However, this does not mean that they understand all of an adult's words or abstract concepts. In fact, preschoolers are often very literal thinkers and interpret ideas concretely. Many are only beginning to think logically and understand sequences of events.

**Preschoolers learn that they can use specific words to say what they mean.** They have long known their parents' words have power over their lives and they are beginning to realize that their own words can make a difference as well. They create more powerful meanings using their growing vocabulary.

**"No" and "Why" become common words for young preschoolers.** Saying "No" is a way a preschooler claims her space. Saying "Why" is a wish to understand the world around her. "Why" is also a word preschoolers use to question authority. Underneath the question, they are saying "Why do you have power over me when I want to feel autonomous?"

**Preschoolers like to participate in decisions.** This gives them a feeling of control and independence. A preschooler might think, "I can take a different position from my mother — and I like it." Or, "By saying what I want, I am a big kid."

**Preschoolers love to imitate other people's words.** They often mimic comments, phrases and sophisticated statements. At times they misuse or exaggerate phrases, particularly during pretend play. A preschooler might say to a doll, "You are so bad you are going to jail for 100 years!"

**Preschoolers like to hear about and describe the same event over and over.** By telling and listening to stories, preschoolers begin to form opinions about the world and how they fit into it. They say "tell me again," because hearing a story many times makes them feel safe and secure. When the story is repeated, it also allows them to imagine new scenarios.

**Preschoolers like to make up their own explanations.** This helps them make sense of things they are only beginning to understand. For example, a preschooler might explain her sadness about winter being over by saying, "When the snow melts, the winter is crying." Preschoolers may also embellish stories with wishful thinking.

**Between three and five, preschoolers refine their understanding of cause and effect.** Older preschoolers can understand simple explanations of cause and effect such as "The medicine will help you get well" and "If you eat healthy food, you will grow big and strong."

**Preschoolers also talk through their bodies, their play and their art.** In fact, verbal communication still may not be the dominant way many preschoolers either understand the world or express themselves

## **How You Communicate**

**Give your preschooler your full attention.** Even a quick but focused connection may fill your child's need for communication. If she says "Play with me," and you are not available, you might explain why or say, "I had a hard day at work today. I need three minutes to change. Then I can play with you." Preschoolers can understand your feelings — to a point — and will appreciate your honesty.

**Be aware of your tone.** Because preschoolers are new to sentence-making themselves, they may have a heightened awareness of your tone and body language.

**Reflect your child's unspoken emotions.** This helps put your child's feelings into words. If she didn't get a turn at the playground, you might say, "You wanted to play with the ball next, didn't you?" or "Boy are you mad!"

**Enlist your preschooler's help in figuring out a problem.** For example, you might say, "Did something in that movie scare you?" If your child doesn't answer, you might follow up by saying, "Could it have been the look on that character's face?"

**Help your preschooler develop emotional awareness.** Even if there is misbehavior — you can talk about it together. Most preschoolers can understand a sentence like "Sometimes, I get mad too. It helps me to go into another room and take some deep breaths."

**Offer limited choices.** Preschoolers gain a sense of control by making their own decisions. You might say, "Do you want to get dressed before or after breakfast today?"

**Don't end your sentence with "OK?" unless you are ready for your child to say "No."** Asking your child if an activity is OK can lead to a lengthy discussion and even a power struggle.

**Grant a preschooler's wish in fantasy.** If your child expresses sadness that a toy has to be shared, you might say, "Would you like it if you had the toy all to yourself? What would you do with it?" By expressing a wish and talking it through, even if it can't be granted, a child begins to calm down.

**Create safe opportunities for preschoolers to express their BIG feelings.** For example, if your child is extremely angry, instead of saying, "Stop yelling," you might say, "Go in the bathroom and scream as loud as you can for one minute."

**Don't over-explain.** Simple explanations may be more effective than long discussions. If your preschooler is having a tantrum, holding her close — or just staying nearby — may mean more than any words you can say.

## **POSITIVE WAYS TO TALK AND LISTEN**

As parents we spend so much of our time talking to our kids — and then wonder why they don't seem to hear us.

In heated moments, we find ourselves stuck in power struggles, but can't figure out what to say to stop the fighting. Sometimes we just don't know how to answer a tough question.

Why can talking with kids be so hard? "The basic challenge is that parents very often speak without understanding how their children receive the message," says Michael Thompson, Ph.D., co-author of *Raising Cain*. "We often make an assumption that our kids understand. But then we wonder, 'Why didn't they do what I said?'"

While many parent-child conversations can lead to misunderstandings, becoming an effective communicator is not only possible - it can even be fun! In this guide you will find practical ways to communicate effectively with kids of any age, using words they can hear and techniques that make sense. The information is based on successful strategies that parents and experts (many of them parents themselves) have used with kids. Remember: There is no script to memorize or order you have to follow. Think of these easy-to-employ ideas as tools you can pull out when you need them to help you and your child understand each other. And keep in mind that there are important times when NOT talking at all may be your best option.

## **SPEND TIME LISTENING**

**Take a break and listen to your child.** Specific actions — like making eye contact, kneeling down to your child's level and even tilting your head-show your child you are listening. They also help YOU stop and really listen. If you can't talk at that moment, you might say, "Let's talk in a few minutes; I'm in the middle of something."

**Repeat what you heard.** It's often useful to restate what you heard and put your child's feelings into words. You might say, "You wanted a turn on the swing right now, didn't you?" or, "You seem sad about going to day care today." These reflective statements acknowledge and give words to your child's feelings. However, do this carefully. If a child is in the middle of a tantrum, saying "You're really mad and out of control!" may aggravate the situation rather than help it.

**Ask specific questions to gather more information.** You might say, "Can you tell me exactly what happened?" If it makes sense to talk some more, you might ask, "What upset you the most?" Follow-up questions both acknowledge your child's feelings and get her talking about them. And they help you gather more information, so you can better understand what actually happened and how your child is thinking about it.

## **CONSIDER YOUR CHILD'S OPINIONS**

**See the situation through your child's eyes.** You know how you feel when your boss or partner says, "That's ridiculous," or insists you really like something you know you hate? Kids feel the same way when parents say, "You don't really mean that," or "I can't believe you said that!"

**Acknowledge your child's feelings.** In response to your child's statement, you might simply say, "I'm glad to know that," or "I understand." At times, this acknowledgement is all your child needs to hear.

**Try not to contradict your child's statement immediately, even if you think he's wrong.** Hear him out before saying no. If your child says, "I don't want to go to school anymore," instead of saying "You have to go," you might ask, "What's the worst thing about it?"

**Listen to your child's request without judging or correcting it.** Good teachers give a child a chance to explain himself first, even if he's wrong. The same technique works at home.

## PAUSE AND THINK OUT LOUD

**Give yourself a moment to think about what your child is asking.** Even if your final answer will still be "No," you might say, "Let me think about what you're saying for a minute and get back to you."

**Pause to consider your child's question.** This forces you to slow down and helps you not to make a snap judgment, even if the answer is, "No, we are not getting a bunny." Pausing makes your child feel heard, because you have stopped to consider her opinion; it also diminishes the chances of a power struggle.

**Share your thinking out loud.** Your children will enjoy being included in your thought processes. If your child asks for a sleep over, you might say, "I know you want a sleep over, but your grandmother may want to see you this weekend when she visits. Let me talk to her." In this way your child knows how you arrive at your decision.

## ACCEPT THE FEELINGS

**Allow your child's negative feelings to come out, even if they are hard to take.** Simply being there, without saying much, may soothe and comfort your child. Sometimes you just need to wait it out until the feeling is expressed.

**Avoid attacking your child's character.** If your child acts out, instead of saying, "Bad girl, how dare you speak to me that way," you might say, "That kind of language is not OK." In this way, you are separating the behavior from the child. You don't want to imply that your child is intrinsically bad, or make her ashamed of her feelings.

**Tell your child how her behavior makes you feel.** "Don't hide your feelings," advises John Gottman, Ph.D., author of *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child*. "In fact, your feelings may be the best form of discipline, as long as they are not used to attack your child." You might express the depth of your emotions with phrases such as, "I am very disappointed in what you did," or, "It makes me sad that you lied to me."

**Tell your child how you feel about yourself.** In this way, your child knows you have feelings and learns how to express her own. You might say, "I had a bad day at work today, I'm in a crummy mood," or, "I blew it. I'm sorry I made a mistake." Be aware that if you spend too much time talking about how you feel, your child may feel overwhelmed (or bored) by your level of emotion. On the other hand, if you never articulate your feelings, your child may not feel permission to articulate her own.

## IMAGINE SOLUTIONS TOGETHER

**Grant in fantasy what you can't give in reality.** If your child badly wants something that he can't have, encourage him to imagine what he wants — and talk about it. You might say, "What would you do if we could stop the car right now?" or, "I bet you wish Mommy was here right now. What would you want to do with her?"  
(And then, stand in for Mommy and do it, if the request is reasonable and possible.)

**Ask a child what he wants to happen or would like to change.** If your child complains about something specific, you might ask him to suggest some improvements. For example, if he says, "I hate music class because Mr. Block is so mean," you might first ask, "What's the meanest thing Mr. Block did?" Then, follow up and ask, "What do you wish your teacher had done instead?"

**Use dialogue to find solutions.** By first letting your child vent negative feelings, and then asking him to imagine a different scenario, you are encouraging him not only to discuss the problem, but to become part of the solution.

## **LIGHTEN UP**

**Use humor — but not at your child's expense.** Not every conflict needs to be resolved through serious discussion. Sometimes humor is the best way out. You might say, "Ouch, that hurts!" instead of "Don't talk to me that way, young man!" Rather than "Clean your room now!" you might say, "This place is a like a biology lab! I don't see mold yet, but it'll start growing soon!"

**Try a playful approach, not a critical one.** If you're struggling over what your preschooler should wear, try, "Let's see what you can put on your doll and then find something like that for you." You could joke with your school-age child about "how dumb I am" instead of criticizing him for criticizing you. You could even suggest ten minutes of your child's favorite activity before getting down to homework.

**Focus on the positive before bringing up the negative.** For example, if your child pulls a practical joke that makes a mess, you might say, "Clever. Ingenious. Now clean it up." If he brings home a test with mistakes, first comment on what he got right before discussing what he got wrong.

**Admit your mistakes.** Ask your child for help in figuring out what to do. Kids love to hear parents admit they were wrong. You might say, "Am I making a mess of this? Should we try to figure it out a different way?"

**Tell a funny story about yourself as a child.** Most kids love to hear stories about their parents growing up. You might tackle a tough topic by describing what happened to you in a similar situation when you were a kid. However, don't turn all conversations into stories about you. Constantly saying, "I know how you feel, let me tell you what happened to me," may annoy more than amuse.

## **YOU ARE TALKING TO A KID**

**Remember that you are bigger than your child — so get on her level.** Imagine what it feels like to look up at someone every time you speak or to try to catch someone's attention from floor level. To help your child hear you, get down where she is and make eye contact. This sends a signal that you are listening and that you care what she's thinking.

**Offer limited choices.** Choices give kids a sense of power and control. Instead of saying, "Time to get dressed," you might say, "Do you want the red shirt or the blue one?" Offer two choices, not five or six. You might say, "Do you want peas or green beans?" or "Do you want to brush your teeth first or comb your hair?"

**Speak as simply as possible.** A one-sentence answer may be much more effective than a long explanation. Children are often satisfied with a simple, direct answer that addresses their main concern. A lengthy explanation may confuse or bore your child.

**Write notes.** Sometimes older kids respond better to a written note than to a verbal nag. You might post this note: "Please write down here what time you will be home!" Or, "Today is room-cleaning day." Some kids may enjoy writing lists and charts themselves as a way of solving problems with you.

## **LISTEN TO YOURSELF TALK**

**Listen to your tone instead of your words.** At times, it's not what say, but the way you say it that makes an impact. Kids sense what their parents are feeling. Often, they are not listening to your words so much as looking at your face and reacting to the tone of your voice.

**Talk to your child as though you're composing a song.** "Parent-child communication is composed of both music and lyrics," comments Michael Thompson. "When someone listens to music, he may focus on either the melody or on the lyrics. Children are always listening to the melody (or tone) of a parent's voice. Unfortunately, we, the parents, are often paying more attention to our lyrics."

**Listen to yourself from your child's perspective.** If you feel a conflict brewing, ask yourself, "Would I like to be spoken to this way?" If you don't like the way you sound, ask yourself, "Am I mad about something without realizing it?"

## **ASK REAL QUESTIONS**

**Avoid leading questions.** Questions that include an answer, such as, "Don't you want to change your clothes before we leave?" or, "Wouldn't you like to apologize to your sister now?" are really orders, not queries. These questions are likely to provoke a sullen response, or a plain old "NO."

**Instead, ask valid questions.** Questions such as "What do you like (or hate) most about school right now?" will produce real answers. A real question about food might be, "You haven't been eating much lunch lately, what would you like to have today?" In comparison, a leading question on the same topic would be, "You know you like peanut butter, don't you want some?"

**Avoid general questions.** Whether you have a preschooler or a preteen, well-meaning but general questions such as "How was school?" often produce only one-word answers, such as "good," "bad" or "OK." General questions often lead to dead-end conversations.

**Instead, ask specific questions to inspire productive conversations.** Refer to something that happened recently, such as, "Is Spanish class getting any easier?" These questions work because they draw on your child's unique experience and therefore elicit specific responses.

## **TALKING ABOUT TOUGH TOPICS**

**Find out what your child knows already.** If your child asks you a difficult question (about sex, death, politics, etc.), you might simply ask, "What have you heard?" This allows your child to tell you what she understands — or misunderstands — and perhaps what concerns are prompting her question.

**Keep your answers simple.** Give answers that are appropriate for your child's age. One simple sentence may be enough. Underneath a child's question, she may be worried about her safety, so offer reassurance. You might describe the different ways she is safe and say, "The policeman is there to protect us," or, "The flight attendant is showing us how to stay safe on the airplane."

**Ask more questions.** For example, if your child asks you about people being injured on the news, you might say, "I feel sad those people got hurt. How do you feel?"

**Talk again.** Be prepared for children to ask the same question many times. This means they are continuing to think about the issue and may need more information. You might save some information for later discussions.

## **DON'T DISCUSS EVERYTHING**

**Don't turn a statement into a question.** Instead of saying, "It's time to leave the playground in five minutes, OK?" simply say, "We're leaving in five minutes." Don't ask for your child's permission. However, you might want to briefly explain your logic, remembering that an explanation is not the same as a negotiation.

**Offer choices only when there really is a choice.** Be clear about negotiable and non-negotiable situations. If your child refuses to go to school, you might say, "I know you don't feel like going to school today. We still have to leave in ten minutes."

**Don't let discussions go on too long.** If there really is no choice about the outcome, too much talking just postpones the inevitable. If need be, walk away from your child or get involved in some other activity.

## THE ART OF NEGOTIATING WITH KIDS

You say, "It's time for bed." "It's time to go." "It's time for homework." "It's dinnertime!" But your child says, "Five more minutes." You are tired of saying "No" and tired of fighting. So, what do you do? Give in? Blow up? Or — negotiate?

Life with kids often involves negotiation, whether we like it or not. According to Scott Brown, author of *How to Negotiate With Kids Even When You Think You Shouldn't*, "The negotiation between parents and kids can actually be a great learning experience for your kids. If you don't negotiate, your children may not learn how to deal with conflicts constructively. If you don't teach them how to work with you, they may never learn how to work with others."

However, negotiating with kids is often a challenging process. "Parents need to learn how to manage their own emotions and frustrations. One thing we know from observing negotiators of all ages is that when emotions run high, negotiating skill drops dramatically," says Brown, who has worked internationally in conflict resolution. Before you enter your next negotiation with your child (and that could be in five minutes!), click "Next" below and get pointers for negotiating with kids and more.

## STRATEGIES FOR WORKING IT OUT

**Start an agreement, not an argument.** Phrase your requests so that your child can say "Yes." He will listen more readily if you pitch your idea in a way that appeals to his need for control and independence. If you say, "Would you like to set out the plates or the spoons?" you are more likely to get cooperation than if you say, "Set the table NOW!"

**Get your child involved.** If it's getting near bedtime, you might say, "How many minutes do you think you should have to finish this project and get in bed on time?" If you are discussing discipline, you might ask, "What do you think would be a reasonable consequence for hitting me?" or, "for not doing your chores?"

**Explain your point of view.** You could say, "We have to leave the playground because I have to make dinner." Once you explain what's on your mind, remain open to any response. If your child says, "I don't care, I'm not hungry," you might say, "But I am and so is your brother."

**Know that negotiation doesn't mean giving in.** When you negotiate to buy a new car, you're not giving in - you're bargaining. Keep in mind that negotiating is not about winning and losing.

**Negotiate issues in age-appropriate ways.** If your school-age child doesn't like peas, you might ask, "What vegetable would you like instead?" If your preschooler is not interested in eating at all, instead of arguing, you might consider playfully cutting a sandwich into interesting shapes to make it more appealing.

**Respond to criticism with a reasonable question.** If your child tells you to stop nagging him to clean his room or take a bath, you might say, "How would you manage this yourself? When would you like to do it?"

**Take time to cool down.** If your child is making you angry or just plain crazy, go into the other room and chill out before trying to talk. "Will an emotional response from you ease the conflict or dig a deeper hole?" asks Brown.

**Write down solutions.** Get the family together and appoint a secretary who makes a list of everyone's ideas. Discuss them openly but don't allow criticism of anyone's idea. Also consider doing your negotiation in writing. Penning notes to your older child (like "Room Cleaning 5 PM") might prompt more agreement than nagging would.

**Let your child win sometimes.** Pick your battles wisely and remember that changing your mind does not mean you are losing. You might say, "OK, I agree with you. But let's make a deal that next time you will listen to me before blowing up."



**Remember, you have final say.** You don't have to reach consensus in any negotiation. Sometimes, somebody just has to make a decision. "It's perfectly OK for parents to make the final decision, as long as they have heard their children's point of view and tried to be fair," says Brown. "Children will come to respect that; they may not like it, but they will come to realize that it's fair."

## **"I CAN'T BELIEVE I SAID IT"**

We've all had times when we couldn't believe the things we've said to our kids. Most parents have blurted out something like, "You'll never learn!" or, "Stop crying now, just stop it!" Then we wonder how these things we swore we'd never say to our kids — that we hated our parents for saying to us — come out of our mouths! "A lot about being a parent is managing feelings of helplessness," says Michael Thompson, Ph.D. "The tantrums of little children make parents feel helpless. When older kids stand up to you and criticize your character, that brings up a different kind of helplessness. And when our kids make us feel helpless, our buttons get pushed, and we say things we wish we hadn't."

Often the best way to deal with it is to admit you're wrong and apologize. "Kids often enjoy nothing better than for their parents to be wrong — and feel validated when their parents apologize," adds Thompson. So instead of beating yourself up when you hear your mother's voice come out of your mouth, take a breath and apologize. The following strategies may help you figure what you need to say when an apology is in order. For ideas on what to say, click "Next" below and get pointers for apologizing to kids — and more!

## **STRATEGIES FOR APOLOGISING TO KIDS**

**Apologize for your behavior, not for yourself.** You might tell your child, "I've been thinking about what happened and I don't like what I said or did."

**Give yourself a momentary time out.** You might say, "I'm sorry, I'm not thinking clearly right now. Give me a moment and I'll get back to you."

**Ask your child, "What could I have done differently?"** Ask her for help in figuring out what to do, and be open to her suggestions. You might say, "Did I make a mess of this?" Kids love to hear parents admit they are wrong.

**You might also ask, "What could you have done differently?"** In a non-accusatory way, review what occurred. Use this opportunity to discuss what you and your child could do differently next time.

**Next time, try joking instead of over-reacting.** You might say with a laugh, "Are you going to drive me totally crazy again?"

**Remember that no parent is perfect.** Think about what provoked your response. Also think about all the good things you do as a parent. Talk to a friend about what happened and find out how she might have handled it.

**Think specifically about how you might behave differently next time.** What is it about your child's behavior that pushes your buttons? Is there something you can do or say that would change the way you react? You might try taking a deep breath before you speak, or walking out of the room until you figure out how you want to react. Think about this when you're calm: the heat of the moment may not be the time to fix this problem, particularly if it's become a pattern.

**Learn from your mistakes - and move on!**

## **UNDERSTANDING AND RAISING BOYS**

### **Active or Aggressive Boys**

CRASH! Boom! BAM!!! "You're dead!"

In their fantasy play, boys turn sticks into guns, balloons into bombs, and pencils into swords. They kill, die and get reborn in a matter of seconds, then hop right up to play some more. And yet many parents worry, wondering if their sons are simply normal, active boys, or turning into potentially violent men.

"Mothers are always saying to me, 'Why is my son racing around, not talking, and not listening? Why is he obsessed with playing war and shooting? What's happened to my sweet, vulnerable little boy who used to cuddle with me?'" says Michael Thompson, Ph.D. host of the documentary RAISING CAIN and co-author of the book of the same name. "This is a valid question, because no one wants their son to grow up to be violent. But interpreting play as an early indicator of violence is a misunderstanding both of the nature of boy activity and the real journey to violence that some boys undergo."

"Anyone who spends a lot of time with boys soon sees that most boys are indeed more active than most girls. A recent Harvard University study states that, "By school age, the average boy in a classroom is more active than the girls — even the most active girls don't seem to express their energy in the unrestrained way characteristic of most boys." While these findings support a stereotype some in our society have worked to eradicate, ask a kindergarten teacher and you'll likely hear that this description is true. "I've been teaching young boys for over 25 years and I don't see that their activity levels have changed, but our expectations for how long they have to sit still have dramatically increased," says teacher Jane Katch, author of *Under Deadman's Skin: Discovering the Meaning of Children's Violent Play*. "And that's a problem for a lot of boys. Some boys in my class need to move a lot. I call them 'high energy boys.' These boys simply can't sit still as long as most of the girls. They don't have the fine motor skills girls do, so many will make big constructions like block towers, while girls will work on smaller, more delicate pictures."

Experts say that you should try not to compare your boy to other boys and keep in mind that there are many different kinds of boys. They range from the highly physical and highly competitive at one end, to the very peaceful quiet boy, who prefers to read. "Not all boys want to compete in sports, wrestle, and shoot guns. It's important to remember that there are quiet boys and studious and bookish boys as well, and this is perfectly normal," adds Thompson.

### **Understanding Boy Aggression**

What did the boys play at recess today? Luke Skywalker vs. Darth Vader. Batman vs. the bad guys. And Batman won.

In most games, young boys clobber, kill, or cream someone. If four girls are playing house in a preschool classroom, it's not uncommon for four boys to go in and rob them. These games and fantasies, while disturbing to some, are not unusual. In fact, they are the norm. However if someone gets hurt during this play, a boy gets in trouble and is often labeled aggressive. But is he? And is this cause for concern?

**What does it mean to be aggressive?** According to *Webster's Dictionary*, aggression is "a forceful action... the process of making attacks... hostile, injurious, behavior... caused by frustration." Real life boy examples include physical fighting, name-calling, and rough-housing that results in injury. Aggression is part of the human repertoire. "All human beings have the ability to protect themselves and attack others when in danger," explains Thompson.

**Why do boys become aggressive?** Sometimes boys are aggressive because they are frustrated or because they want to win. Sometimes they are just angry and can't find another way to express that feeling. And some may behave aggressively, but they're not aggressive all the time.

**An active boy is not necessarily an aggressive one.** "We often see young boys playing out aggressive themes. It's only a problem when it gets out of control," comments Thompson.

**Competition, power and success are the true stuff of boys' play.** Many young boys see things in competitive terms and play games like "I can make my marble roll faster than yours," "my tower is taller than yours" and "I can run faster than you." But these games of power and dominance are not necessarily aggressive unless they are intended to hurt.

**Fantasy play is not aggressive.** A common boy fantasy about killing bad guys and saving the world is just as normal as a common girl fantasy about tucking in animals and putting them to bed. "Most boys will pick up a pretzel and pretend to shoot with it," comments teacher Jane Katch. "If a boy is playing a game about super heroes, you might see it as violent. But the way he sees it, he's making the world safe from the bad guys. This is normal and doesn't indicate that anything is wrong unless he repeatedly hurts or tries to dominate the friends he plays with. And sometimes an act that feels aggressive to one child was actually intended to be a playful action by the child who did it. When this happens in my class, we talk about it, so one child can understand that another child's experience may be different than his own. This is the way empathy develops."

**Only a small percentage of boys' behavior is truly aggressive.** While "all boys have normal aggressive impulses which they learn to control, only a small percentage are overly aggressive and have *chronic* difficulty controlling those impulses," says Michael Thompson, Ph.D. These are the boys who truly confuse fantasy with reality, and frequently hit, punch, and bully other kids. They have a lack of impulse control and cannot stop themselves from acting out. "They cannot contain their anger and have little control over their physical behavior and this is when intervention by parent or teacher is needed," says Thompson.

### **Is it the Media**

Does violence in the media contribute to boys' aggressive behavior or does it reflect it? And what can parents and teachers do about it?

**Why do boys like scary stories and violent media?"**They're awesome," says one boy. And there's nothing new about their presence in boys' lives. Throughout history, fairy tales and other forms of children's literature have captured children's imaginations with scary characters and violent plots.

**Young boys play out what they observe in the world around them.** Until the age of six or seven, children sometimes have trouble distinguishing fantasy and reality. After observing violent images on the TV news, they can't always tell the difference between what is real and what is not, and they worry that this event is going to happen to them. "When wars take place on the other side of the world, some children expect to find bullets in their back yard. Playing out these scenarios is a way to get control over them," says Jane Katch. "In my kindergarten class, kids played Hurricane Katrina. They were hanging from the monkey bars pretending the water was getting higher. They were reassuring themselves, 'What I saw on the news won't happen to me. I can protect myself.'"

**Young boys play out what they see on TV, in movies, and games.** When fairy tales provided the scariest images around, kids' fantasy play involved witches, bears and wolves. Then came TV, and the Lone Ranger and Tonto dominated. Today, some kids as young as five are watching PG-13 and even R-rated films, as well as playing interactive games like Grand Theft Auto intended for older children. And, the images from these games are being incorporated into fantasy play. "So, on top of boys' natural fantasies about good and bad guys, there is now an overlay of terrifying material that they have picked up from the media, the kinds of graphic violence that used to be seen only by adults or much older children. This is troubling for many boys who have trouble distinguishing fantasy from reality. Some boys tell me they can't stop thinking about these images and that they interfere with their ability to focus in school. So we talk about it a lot," says Katch, "sorting out what could really happen in the world from what is make-believe."

**However, media violence is not the cause of real violence.** "There is a clear moral difference between aggression that appears in play and fantasy (like watching a Road Runner cartoon) and actual harm done to other human beings (like calling your sister a 'bitch' or bullying a kid on the playground," says Thomas Newkirk, Ph.D., Professor of English at the University of New Hampshire, and author of *Misreading Masculinity*." I think all of us need the former, and no one should be allowed to freely cross the line into the latter. It is an incredible fallacy to think that if children are protected from depictions of violence, and kept from competitive and play violence, that they will be free of these aggressive tendencies. It probably makes this material even more appealing if it is prohibited. This, of course does not mean that all of it is appropriate."

**Older boys can tell the difference between fantasy and reality.** By age seven, most boys can distinguish media violence from real violence. However, some may become over-stimulated by violent media experiences. "It's important to monitor and even limit your older son's media experiences. But take your cues from your child as there's a wide range of reactions," advises Michael Thompson. "If you find that your eight-year-old son pokes his younger brother in the eye after playing video games, you have to limit his game playing. But some boys won't behave aggressively at all as a result of media exposure. Some people assume that girls can filter out this information, but boys as well — particularly older ones — can tell right from wrong."

## **What Can We Do?**

There are ways we can help support our boys' active impulses and help them work through feelings of aggression. Start by developing an appreciation for what and how boys like to play and by giving them safe spaces at home where they can go wild. And get out the pillows and join in the fun from time to time!

**Allow your boys to play the games they want to play — within reason.** Warlike and competitive games are OK, as long as boys don't hurt each other. Set rules that are right for your house like "no baseball bats inside" but don't inhibit their ability to play. Stay close by and monitor the situation to be sure the kids are in control, but don't intervene unless one boy is dominating the other in a hurtful way.

**Let your boys play games at home that they can't play at school.** Schools may need to limit some types of play because there isn't room or adequate supervision. In addition, if parents don't allow any adventurous, exciting or violent fantasies at home, the boy may feel like nobody thinks his thoughts are OK.

**Limit the amount and type of violence your young boys are exposed to through television, movies, and video games.** The images from the media often frighten children under age seven, and may stay with them in their play.

**Control the remote. Make sure your television is located where you can see what your child is watching.** If allowed to channel surf, young children may discover exciting (but disturbing) programs. "Young children may be fascinated by these shows. While they may know they are not OK to watch, they may not want to tell you about what they saw," advises Jane Katch.

**Remember boys' adventurous fantasies are not the same as real aggression.** If boys do play games filled with violent imagery, don't tell them not to play them. Instead, talk together about how these games make others feel, and set rules to ensure the game is safe. "Instead of telling him to 'stop talking or playing games about destruction,' try to look at the game from his point of view and then discuss how he can make sure the game doesn't scare or hurt anyone else," suggests Katch. "Don't freak out if the themes of the game are violent, they are just themes, not reality," adds Thompson.

**Find appropriate places for boys to act out their games.** Instead of saying, "stop running around in the restaurant," suggest you save the game for outside. Instead of saying, "Don't be so wild at school," you might suggest "When you walk into school you have to stop doing that." This way, boys learn that the game is OK, but the behavior is not appropriate for a specific occasion and needs to be modified.

**Try not to be critical of your son's interests.** "There's a thin line between hating the things a boy likes and hating the boy," says Joseph Tobin. "If everyday you're telling a boy, 'I can't believe you like this stuff,' you are telling him that there is something wrong with what he is interested in. That said, I'm not saying that all media is appropriate."

**Keep communication open and keep talking together.** Ask your boy to tell you about his world, what he likes and what disturbs him. And listen to how he feels without judgment so he doesn't feel he has to hide those things from you. Try talking over a game of catch, instead of a formal sit-down chat. And be sensitive when he gets mad. "When your son gets dramatically upset or angry (particularly at you) don't just send him for a time out, instead, help him articulate what he is feeling. Keep in mind that he may not be able to explain it in that moment, but that he will talk sooner or later," advises Thompson.

**Keep in mind when you inhibit boys' natural aggression, they may become more aggressive.** "Punishing boys by taking outlets like recess away may only encourage them to become more excited and aggressive" says Thompson. "Recess is part of the curriculum and it has a function," adds Joseph Tobin. "Teachers take it away because boys like it. But if boys liked reading, would teachers take that away?"

## **UNDERSTANDING AND RAISING GIRLS**

### **Girls and their Brains**

What makes a girl a girl? Is it nature -- the way her brain is wired -- or nurture -- the way she is raised by her family and influenced by society? Could it be both of these factors? And how can this information help parents understand and raise their girls? PBS Parents turned to its panel of experts on girls to debate these questions.

JoAnn Deak, Ph.D., an expert on brain research and author of *Girls Will Be Girls*, says that today's brain researchers see a combination of forces. "The controversy between nature and nurture in the research community really focuses on which has the most significant influence. Some land on one side or the other, and some say 'It depends.' "

Deak notes that recent research reveals some interesting physical differences between male and female brains. "When we look at the most current brain and gender research," comments Deak, "we see clear differences in girl and boy brains: the size and composition of the neurons, how they are wired, even the array of chemicals in their brains." Some researchers believe these differences may affect how girls learn, how they relate socially, how they experience emotion, and how they approach physical risk-taking.

According to Catherine Steiner-Adair, Ed.D., co-author of *Full of Ourselves: A Wellness Program to Advance Girl Power, Health and Leadership*, parents and the media may have a greater effect in shaping a girl's behavior than gender-specific brain differences. "I think the brain research is fascinating and important, but the way we raise our children and the messages we give them about what it means to be a girl are far more powerful than anything genetic."

### **Girls and their Bodies**

Parents of girls face a challenge today: How do they raise their daughters to feel good about their bodies without falling into the eating disorder trap?

The facts are disturbing. Nearly half of the nation's girls are unhappy with their bodies. An obsession with thinness is affecting not only high-school girls, but also their younger sisters. Alarming statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and the National Association of Eating Disorders report that ten out of every hundred American girls have an eating disorder; more than 50 percent of today's teenage girls are on diets and use unhealthy means to control their weight; and 42 percent of first- to third-grade girls want to be thinner. Forty percent of newly identified cases of anorexia are in girls 15 to 19 years old.

However, there is also some good news. Girls are playing sports more, dancing more and studying martial arts -- and these activities can help them develop assertiveness and healthy relationships with their bodies. But parents remain rightfully concerned for their girls. Even if your family follows healthy eating and exercise habits, there are still many societal pressures influencing girls today.

"The problem begins with our culture and its over-the-top obsession with body image," comments Catherine Steiner-Adair, Ed.D, co-author of *Full of Ourselves -- A Wellness Program to Advance Girl Power, Health, and Leadership*, and a clinical psychologist and instructor of psychiatry at McLean Hospital at Harvard Medical School. "You can't talk about a girl's sense of herself without talking about her body image. By the age of six, girls are beginning to think of themselves both as a person and a body, and many six-year-olds are aware that when they walk into a room, how they look is an important statement about who they are." As early as third grade, Steiner-Adair notes, some girls are conducting an internalized body-checking dialogue with themselves, thinking, for instance, "That girl's hair is better than mine." "By middle school," Steiner-Adair says, "for the vast majority of girls, who they are and what they look like is inextricably intertwined." In her book, Steiner-Adair describes how many girls literally "weigh their self-esteem. This focus on bodies as a primary source of identity predisposes girls

to disordered thinking and disordered eating, which can escalate into a full-blown eating disorder." Disordered eating (skipping meals, dieting or eating mainly junk food) prevents a girl from getting the nourishment she needs to think and learn well.

Fortunately, there are many things parents can do to help their girls develop healthy eating and exercise habits and to help them evaluate the body images they see in the media. This article presents some pointers to help you and your daughter develop a healthy sense of who she is and who she may become.

**This article contains information to help girls develop positive body images, but it does not contain advice on dealing with eating disorders. Experts recommend that if you have any reason to believe that your daughter is becoming obsessed with dieting or is bingeing and purging, talk to your doctor immediately.**

### **Raising a girl with positive body Image**

Catherine Steiner-Adair works with girls and parents in her private practice and speaks about body image and eating disorders in workshops around the country. She recommends the following strategies and talking points to help girls develop positive body images and healthy eating and exercise habits -- and to help them not succumb to images promoted by the culture and adopted by their best friends.

#### **Pink or blue? Think about the messages you are giving your daughter.**

According to Steiner-Adair, the overemphasis on girls' appearance begins at babyhood. "As soon as a baby is dressed in pink or blue, the world responds differently to that baby, as there are gender-based expectations on how girls should behave and what should interest them. Adults respond so much to what a girl looks like that by age five or six, young girls are getting the notion that their body is their selling point. When body image, clothes, marketing for girls is so sexual, it is that much harder for girls to develop a healthy, non-sexualized relationship with their bodies."

#### **Talk about who your daughter is instead of how she looks.**

Steiner-Adair recommends that we compliment girls on qualities other than looks. "Parents so often say 'You look so pretty today,' but don't say things like, 'You were such a good friend today,' or 'You handled that frustration well.' It's very useful to compliment girls on their assertiveness and even their anger with statements like, 'You were brave to tell me how mad you were,' 'I like how you stand up for yourself,' 'You and I disagree and I respect your thinking,' or 'I never would have thought of that; you are so smart about these things.' "

#### **Talk about what women look like in the media.**

Girls' images of themselves are shaped by what they see around them, by brand names in magazines, and in particular, by TV shows that focus more on what women wear and how their bodies look than on what they can do. Steiner-Adair recommends parents limit, but not ban, girls' exposure to television and particularly commercials. Talk with girls about what they see to balance the effects of these images. It's never too early to begin this conversation. "By the age of two, kids are aware of brand names, so think of what the images selling those brands may be doing to them."

#### **Make clothes choices that protect their girlhood.**

Avoid buying clothes for preschool, elementary-school, and middle-school girls that make them look like sexy teenagers, advises Steiner-Adair. "We are living in a time when there are undies for five-year-olds that say 'Juicy Girl' or 'Not on a School Night.' Little girls don't need to wear thongs that say 'Eye Candy' or any clothes that promote a 'sexy chic.' They are just too young to understand this. These products call attention to sexuality, which gets in the way of girls experiencing their bodies as children."

# Preschool Friendships: How the Youngest Girls Make Friends

Friendships blossom and (occasionally) conflicts begin to bloom in preschool, when girls move from parallel play to playing with others.

## **Girl friendships start off magically.**

"The magic of friendship really starts when girls are drawn to each other through imaginative play and common interests. When it works, it's like watching a dance or jazz improvisation," comments Lawrence Cohen, Ph.D., co-author of *Best Friends, Worst Enemies* and *Mom, They're Teasing Me*. "Preschool girls often seem in perfect harmony, creating imaginary worlds and games. Big conflicts do occur -- but there's flexibility and real beauty in their exchanges. I think when girls get older they often look back and miss that complete connection they once had."

## **Preschool girls have an enormous capacity to bond.**

Young girls form attachments that have a great deal of importance and meaning to them. They really 'fall in love.'

A girl's best friend at nursery school is her anchor, and everything becomes right when that friend walks in the classroom door. Experts recommend you don't force friendships on girls, but you can encourage them to reach beyond their social sphere and become comfortable in a range of situations and with a range of people.

## **Girls and boys often stop playing together in preschool.**

The shift into gender-exclusive play begins between ages of three and five for many children. When given a choice, many girls tend to be drawn towards art, dolls, and fantasy games, while boys will more often go into the block area or pull out imaginary swords. "With boys, the activity is the main focus," says Cohen, "but with girls, even young ones, the relationship becomes primary."

## **Experts differ over why even young girls care so deeply about friendships.**

Some brain researchers present the theory that many (but not all) girls' brains may actually be wired with a greater capacity for experiencing emotions and caring than many (but not all) boys' brains. But experts also believe that girls are raised to care and conditioned to be nice. "We socialize girls to care about their relationships from day one," says Lyn Mikel Brown. "We buy girls baby dolls to care for and we stress 'being nice' to everyone from an early age. These are relational skills (even if, in some cases, they reflect a narrow view of relationships) and we encourage girls to practice and develop them."

## **The challenge with threes.**

"Having a 'best friend' can make a young child feel very secure," says Jane Katch, a veteran teacher at the Touchstone School in Grafton, Massachusetts, and author of *They Don't Like Me*. "In a game of pretend, both children know who they like to pretend to be and how the plot should progress. It can be hard for them to allow a third child into the mix. They may think the third person will change the rules or won't know how to play it the right way. When helping a third child join in, I might begin by suggesting the new player ask, 'Who can I pretend to be?' If she encounters resistance, I might ask the other two, 'How can you help her join the game in a way that won't spoil what you're playing?'"

## **Young girls are taught to bury their aggressive feelings.**

"Toddler girls are just as likely to punch and grab and bite as boys," observes Cohen, "but the stage begins to set for girls to suppress their aggressive feelings when authority figures urge them to be nice." As a result, girls are forced to internalize their anger and communicate feelings indirectly, through exclusion, gossip, and meanness.

"In my class," says Katch, "girls' meanness becomes quiet. Girls may just refuse to sit next to someone in a circle."

## **Power plays and exclusion begin when girls are young.**

"Young girls often reach for power by what they say, with statements like 'You can't come to my party'," observes

Katch. This kind of behavior, called relational aggression, involves excluding others and making indirect but deeply hurtful comments. Katch says, "When I see this happening, I talk with the kids. I like to support the child who feels left out while helping the insiders develop empathy. One of the things I ask is, 'How would this feel if



you were the one being excluded?' It reminds them all what it feels like to be in that situation and they're more likely to support the odd girl out."