



# ASK Jane

**Q:** Two years ago, my husband and I allowed our 10-year-old son to play video games on our home computer after school, but we felt this was hurting his concentration and his grades.

So, last year we banned them and his grades improved. The other day I noticed a video game on his cell phone. When I mentioned it to him, he said he'd been playing several all year long — on his phone!

I'm not sure what to make of this! Technically he complied, but he knew he was breaking the rules. My husband and I are upset. His response was that "his grades are good even though he played games all school year." We wouldn't listen and took his games away. "It was unfair," he complained. Our son is almost 12 now. How should we approach this?

**A:** Ouch! I'm sorry about this tension between you and your son. It never feels good to have our children disengage from us, or worse yet, to feel as though

they're deliberately finding loopholes for instructions you'd given in their best interest.

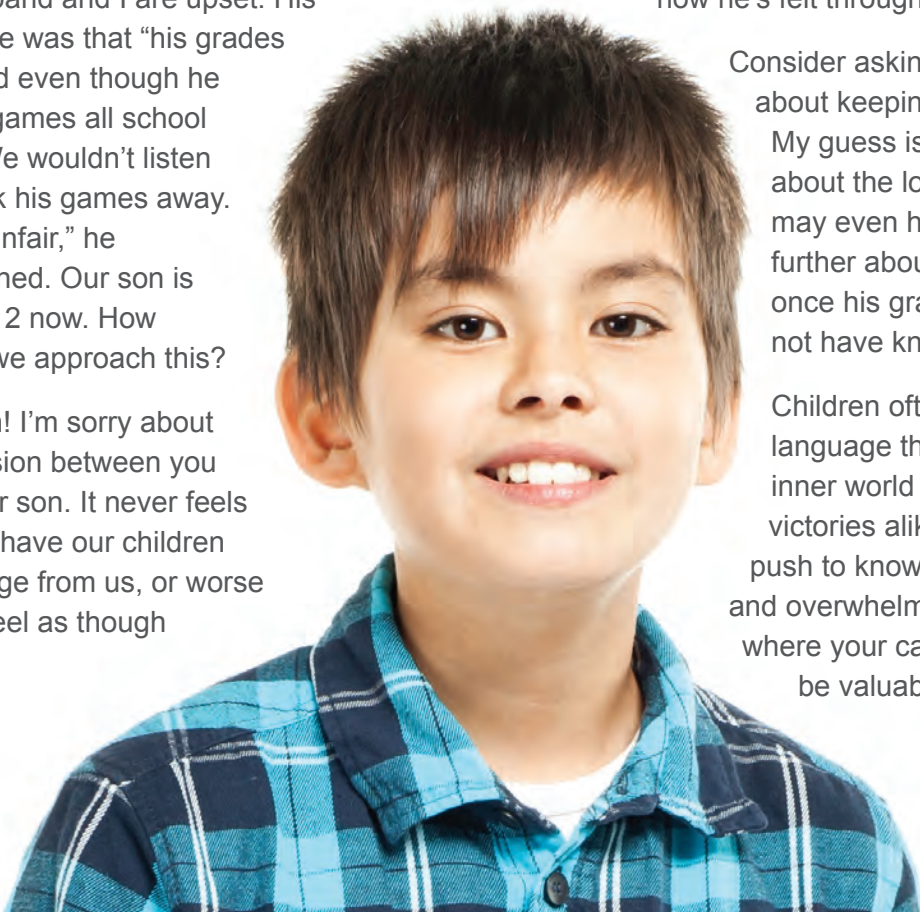
First, every parent has been in a scenario where they feel confused, not listened to, or shut out by their children. And every time, it feels awful. You find yourself thinking, "Where did we go wrong?"

The good news is that you have a wonderful opportunity to communicate your feelings and perspective to your son about why you didn't want him to play video games, his improved grades, his use of the cell phone, and, maybe most important, how he's felt throughout this situation.

Consider asking him how he's felt about keeping his playing a secret.

My guess is he doesn't feel good about the loophole he found; he may even have wanted to talk further about using the computer once his grades improved, but may not have known how.

Children often don't have the language they need to express their inner world — disappointments and victories alike. Often, they need a push to know how to share complex and overwhelming feelings. This is where your calm questioning can be valuable.



Revisiting your initial conversation with this new information about the phone provides a powerful opportunity to model how to talk about difficult feelings. Communicating respectfully and sharing your concerns in an even-toned and inclusive way that invites your son's perspective are critically important.

You see, when parents communicate in non-accusatory and non-judgmental ways it creates openness and warmth so the child can feel free to be heard. Instead of feeling afraid and ashamed (a natural defensive response for a child your son's age), he or she has an opportunity to experience intimacy and togetherness while talking with parents, a rare and cherished gift for a child.

Children are very conscious of an adult's tone of voice; your ability to share concerns and feelings with him in these ways invites him to do the same in the future.

Are you happy that he found a way around your instruction? I'm sure not. Are you happy that his

grades have improved? I'm sure you are. With your openness to all facets of this conversation, you're showing him that even when you disagree on something, you talk about it. This behavior promotes his coming to you in the future and ensures he knows he has another option other than "just going against you." He'll know he's safe and accepted in your home, and that his feelings are welcome.

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Of course, you may decide his behavior requires a punishment. Discuss what it should be together. Maybe you decide how much electronic media is appropriate given his level of commitment to school. No matter how you decide to address it, he'll see you're doing it together.

As your son gets older, the pressure to disobey and to act "cool" by going against your directives will only increase. Having these conversations now is a wonderful way to ensure he's open with you as the potential for negative consequences increases with age.

And congratulations to you and your husband: I know you must have worked really hard to improve his grades, and that you have had a positive impact on him all along. **JPA**

