



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.

Q: I am the parent of three children, Kindergarten through 8th grade. With all the stories in the news about “stranger danger” and the #MeToo movement, for example, sometimes I worry about letting them out of the house. What can I do as a parent to keep them safe?

A: Sometimes the world can feel like a scary place. As parents, we can feel a lot of anxiety about sending our children out into it. Some of the things we worry about we don't have any control over. So first off, permit yourself to let go of some of this anxiety and focus on those things that you can control.

Most young children naturally enjoy exploring their world and will often appear reckless in their approach to things and people we may not feel comfortable with. This is normal and should be encouraged.

As adults, of course, we need to guide them properly without unduly restricting them or making them fearful of everything. You should try to create a balance between creating awareness of potential dangers and being positive about going out into the world. Children who feel confident in themselves and their parents' support are less likely to find themselves in difficult situations.

Starting at home, be sure to create a warm, responsive and caring environment within which

your children can grow to be strong, confident and resilient. Respect their feelings and answer their questions age-appropriately. Creating a climate of trust at home will ensure you'll be able to have good honest talks with your children about issues they may confront. These traits will help your child be less vulnerable to the pressures or dangers out in the world.

Because young children (and even older ones) can't be counted on to make good decisions all the time, it's important to provide good supervision when young and open lines of communication with them as they grow. We want our children to feel that they can come to us with any question or problem, big or small. Being a good listener is critical.

Don't just answer the question asked, listen for the emotion behind it. Be prepared to ask, non-confrontationally and without panicking or becoming upset yourself, “What made you ask that question?” Take the time to really hear the answer. Your child may have seen or experienced something he or she doesn't understand and will express a thought in simple terms. This way, you're likely to discover if there's a worrisome situation at hand or simply one that needs to be explained.

By respecting your children's feelings, you'll help them trust those feelings. This attitude is critical because their "radar" gives them information about whether a situation might be unsafe and avoided. In that way, a young child might be able to say "No" to touches or suggestions that make them feel uncomfortable and tell you or another trusted adult right away. In the same vein teens who pay attention to their feelings can better say "No" to the party where peer pressure can lead to drinking and other negative behaviors.

Your children will feel more prepared and empowered if you've talked with them and even practiced situations that could come up in the world. The idea isn't to frighten them, but rather to build their sense of being capable.

The "What if" game can be a great way to give them tools to handle the outside world. For instance, "What if we were at Jewel and got separated?" "What if a stranger approaches you on the playground and asks you to come with him?" "What if your friends do something bad and want you to do it with them?"

Practice different situations they might encounter to help them feel and be prepared. Luckily, the world is a phenomenal place full of wonderful people and experiences. I'm confident that your care for your children will help them enjoy all it has to offer.

Most sincerely,

Jane **JPA**

