

# Will You Be My Valentine?

A friend recently overheard an interesting conversation between a mother and child.

BY MARIA T. ARANDA, PH.D.

**"TODAY REBECCA SAID IN class that Johnny likes me."**

"Honey, don't be silly. You are too young to like anybody. You're only in first grade, so please stop."

The thought of childhood crushes may spark anxiety in many parents. Childhood crushes, however, are a very normal and common experience. Even early-grade crushes are common.

What do they mean?

Childhood crushes are usually not true love experiences. Often they are simply manifestations of grown up behavior, similar to pretending to be a doctor or teacher or mother. Tween crushes are also inevitable and serve many purposes. For one, they are a way to fit in or obtain attention from peers. Tween crushes also help kids think about the kind of people they are and the type of person they want to love when they have grown up.

I do offer a note of caution. Current societal and cultural pressures have made the topic of crushes a very complex issue. At very early ages, our children are bombarded by songs with provocative lyrics and shows that highlight 9-year-olds in skin-tight clothes. At times, they glamorize behavior that isn't age appropriate. As studies repeatedly show, children's behavior is influenced by what they see and hear. Today's media is pervaded with messages that makeup, muscles, clothes and popularity – as well as flirtatious and even overtly sexual behavior – are what make a person attractive. These messages are confusing for children and detract from an important lesson. That lesson is that a person's internal attributes – their kindness, loyalty, integrity, loving nature and responsibility – really make a successful future partner likeable and attractive.



How parents manage the topic of crushes is important. Blowing the topic out of proportion or ignoring the issue are common mistakes. Similarly, making fun of the child is not recommended as this could lead to secretive behavior. Parents, after all, want children to feel safe discussing these things with them. Dismissing children as "too young for crushes" also may send the message that the child's feelings are not normal. In turn, this can lead the child to think that something is wrong with him or her.

Instead, try taking a neutral and curious stance that demonstrates your interest in your child's feelings and thoughts. What is it that your child likes about the other person? What does the other child do that is funny,

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likeable or nice? How does your child behave in the presence of his or her crush?

Crushes also offer the opportunity for parents to send the messages that caring about friends and showing kindness to others are important. If the crush appears to become too intense (in other words, if your child is not playing with other friends or if he or she is obsessing or expressing distraught feelings), a frank conversation is needed to emphasize how caring for peers is nice, but smothering them can worsen the relationship. Emphasizing the importance of other friendships and the need to give them attention is an important lesson to learn. The child may end up quite lonely if other friendships are not maintained.

Yes, the announcement by your 8-year-old that he or she has a crush may be startling on Feb. 14. Handled with some finesse, however, that crush may just strengthen the bonds you have with your own favorite little Valentine.



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