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First Crush

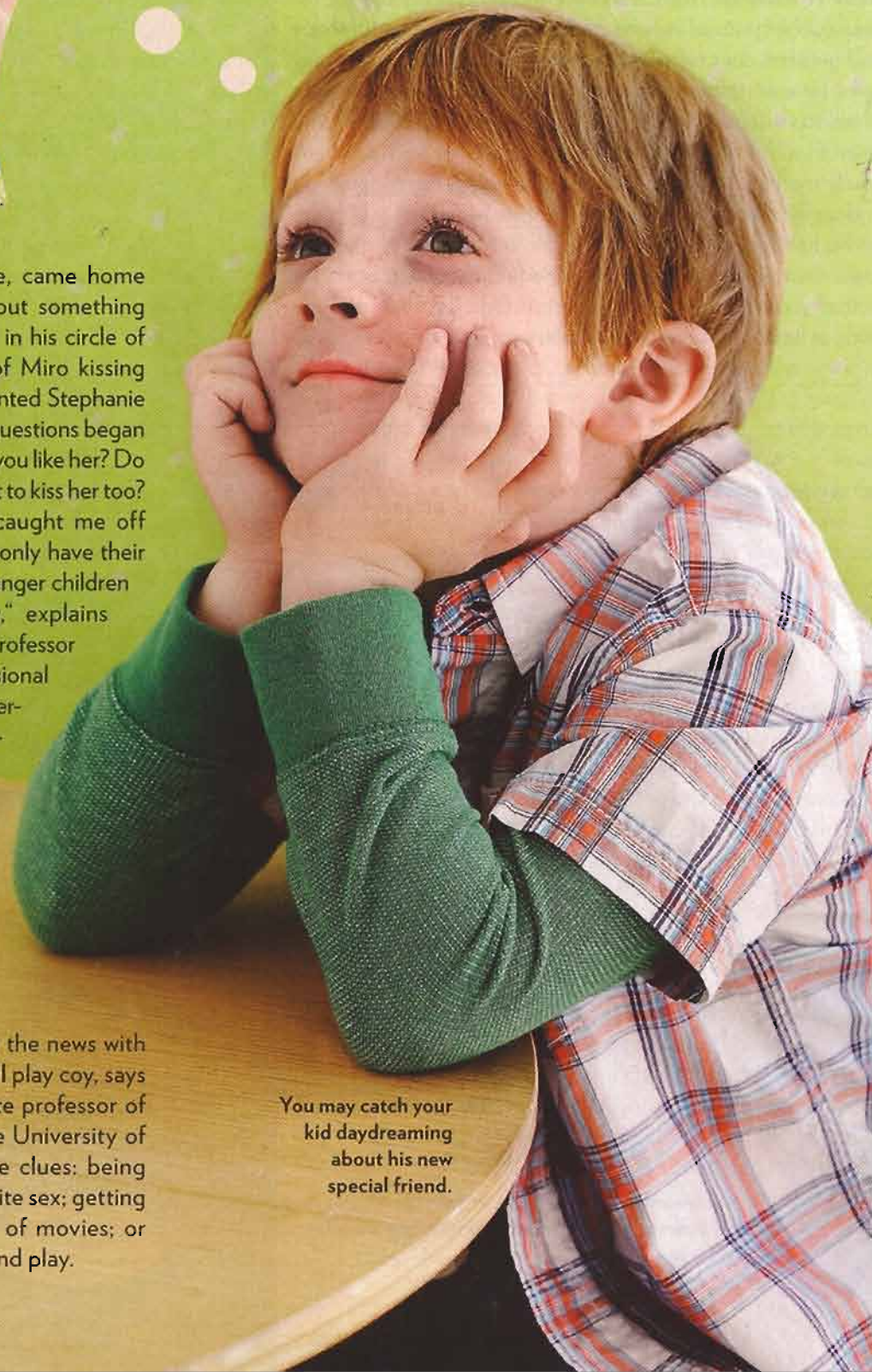
When school begins, so do playground weddings. How should you cope with a bad case of puppy love? BY RACHEL AYDT

My 6-year-old son, Jamie, came home from school talking about something new that had happened in his circle of friends. He'd caught a glimpse of Miro kissing Stephanie on the cheek, but he wanted Stephanie to be his girlfriend, not Miro's. My questions began pouring out: Does Stephanie know you like her? Do you think she likes you? Do you want to kiss her too?

Although Jamie's infatuation caught me off guard, experts say that kids commonly have their first crush when they're 5 or 6. "Younger children focus their love on their family," explains Cynthia Langtiw, Psy.D., assistant professor at The Chicago School of Professional Psychology. "But as kids enter kindergarten or first grade, they feel affection for their classmates too because they're spending more time in school and in activities outside their family." How should you handle these innocent infatuations? Take these (love) notes.

Spot the Signs

Your kid might be eager to share the news with you. However, it's more likely she'll play coy, says Kristin Lagattuta, Ph.D., associate professor of developmental psychology at the University of California, Davis. Look for these clues: being giggly about a friend of the opposite sex; getting interested in the romantic plots of movies; or incorporating marriage into pretend play.



You may catch your kid daydreaming about his new special friend.

Get the Scoop

You may want to avoid the subject altogether or squeeze out every last detail. The best tactic: Don't push, but start with general questions and follow your child's lead. For instance, if your son says he has a girlfriend, ask what that means to him. His response may range from "She's my best friend" to "We got married during recess." How can you find out what's going on if he doesn't bring up the topic? "You might say, 'I noticed that you've been hanging out with Violet lately. Do you feel different when you're around her?'" suggests Dr. Langtiw. Try not to chuckle at what he says or dismiss his feelings, because you want him to feel comfortable opening up to you.

Determine if the Crush Is Mutual

Suppose your daughter likes a boy in her class. After you explore what she's going through, ask about whether she thinks the boy feels the same about her. If she doesn't think that he likes her in that way, explain that it's important to respect his feelings. You can say something such as, "I know you like Josh, but you shouldn't try to make him like you, because he might feel uncomfortable and that's not how real friends treat each other." By the same token, if a boy has a crush on your

daughter but she doesn't share his feelings, let her know that it's okay not to want to be his girlfriend.

Set Boundaries

While crushes often never amount to more than writing notes to each other or hanging out at recess together, some kids may want to hold hands or kiss on the cheek. Experts generally agree that these physical behaviors have nothing to do with sexuality at this age. "Kids are just starting on a path of putting together the ideas of love, physical feelings, and connection," says Lisa Spiegel, cofounder of Soho Parenting, in New York City. But it's smart to talk about boundaries. "You can tell your child that it's okay to play together at school but not to kiss," says Dr. Langtiw.

Heal Hurt Feelings

Early infatuations usually don't last long—and most kids get over them quickly. However, your son may be hurt if a classmate says she doesn't want to be his "girlfriend" anymore. "Ask him how he feels about it," suggests Dr. Lagattuta. "Then point out all his great qualities and the other friends he has." It's also helpful to mention some of your experiences from childhood so your child realizes that what he's going through is perfectly normal. □

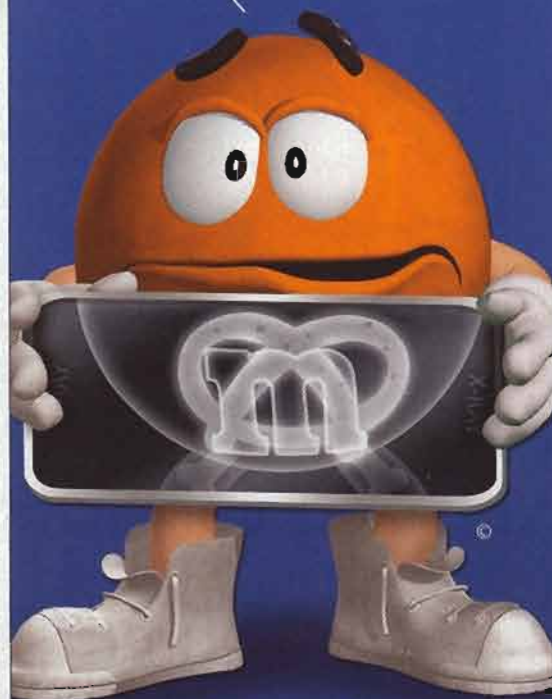


When my husband is out with our daughter and she needs to pee, should he take her into the men's room or wait outside the door of the women's?

It's a judgment call best left to your spouse and your daughter depending on where they are and what makes them feel most comfortable. "She may say, 'I want to use the girls' room' or 'I want to be with you, Daddy,'" says Kyle Pruett, M.D., a *Parents* advisor and author of *Partnership Parenting*. If she opts for the ladies' room, he can look for a mom with young kids who'd be happy to escort her. Otherwise it's best for him to whisk her as quickly and discreetly as possible into a men's bathroom stall. Most guys value their privacy at the urinal, so she isn't likely to see much.



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