

TEACHING YOUR CHILD TO SHARE

All parents want their child to learn to share. It seems to signal their child's maturity, empathy and ability to truly play with another child instead of fighting over the same toy the entire playtime. Parents often feel their child's behavior is a direct result of their parenting skills or an imitation of themselves. When they observe him grabbing toys and shouting "Mine!" they feel that they have somehow failed to teach him this important skill of sharing. It is important for parents to understand sharing from the child's developmental perspective. It will benefit both of you to relax and refrain from labels such as "selfish" or "mean." Your child is trying to figure out the how and why of sharing.

THE CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE

As with all development, the ability to share progresses through stages.

Nine months: Your child may enjoy seeing another child, but you cannot expect him to understand the concept of sharing, nor is it developmentally appropriate to force sharing into his play situation. Older infants need to be closely supervised as they explore one another and can often be easily distracted with another toy or activity when a conflict arises.

12 months: Your child is working hard at being independent and figuring out her own identity. She continues to be self-centered and is not able to think about anything from another person's perspective. In a play situation she may play beside another child; however, she regards him as an object rather than a person with feelings and desires similar to her own. At this age your child is generally not possessive about her own toy, but usually wants to play with the other child's toy. It's not developmentally appropriate to expect her to share.

Toddlers: As a toddler, your child has not yet formed a clear boundary between himself and the outside world. He continues to view the other child as an object to be manipulated by poking, pulling, pinching and pushing. He also believes all property

is an extension of himself and sees nothing wrong with grabbing dolls, buckets, tricycles or anything that takes his fancy.

Your two-year-old has the understanding that if she gives her toy away, it's gone forever. The concept of give-and-take is just too complicated for children this age. Very few toddlers will freely share without adult intervention.

During this stage of development, your child will play alongside her playmate for long periods of time without direct interaction. They seem to not even look at each other, yet they will imitate one another's play behavior. A realistic goal may be to encourage taking turns, a step toward learning to share. Using language such as, "I see you want that ball all to yourself. When you're finished, how about giving it to Sam? Are you finished now, or would you like to play with it a little longer?" will encourage taking turns in a way that does not shame your child.

Don't expect your toddler to be a generous playmate. You can keep conflict to a minimum in play situations by:

- Making sure there are doubles of several especially popular toys.

- Asking the other child's parent to bring over a few favorite playthings.

- Putting new and special toys away if your child appears reluctant to share them.

- Introducing a diversionary activity both children can enjoy while taking away a toy that has caused a dispute.

Threes and Fours: Learning to share is not something that happens overnight, but rather it is a process which emerges in small steps as your child grows. By age three, he is more socially aware of others and less self-centered. He will enjoy forming some of his first real friendships. He participates in group activities and generally understands the idea of taking turns with play objects; however, spontaneous sharing is still rare.

A preschooler has difficulty grasping the idea that something she shares will be returned to her. She continues to believe once it leaves her possession, it's gone! It is also a long process to develop empathy toward another child in a play situation. Your child can't see that if she doesn't share, the other child is going to be left without something to play with.

You are needed to continue suggesting appropriate behavior in sharing situations. As with so many other aspects of your life as a parent, you set the example. If you share freely and happily with him as well as with your friends, your child will, in time, follow your lead.