

# Sharing

**We all want our children to share, think of others, and be generous.** These are wonderful traits to instill in our children, but keep in mind that it takes many years and many steps along the way to develop the ability to share. Nature has designed children to begin life focused on themselves, NOT to share. It is Mother Nature's way of guaranteeing survival of her smallest. Sharing is simply not something a child under three can do. A child who says "Mine!" is no more selfish than a baby who doesn't walk is lazy.

Typical behaviors can include:

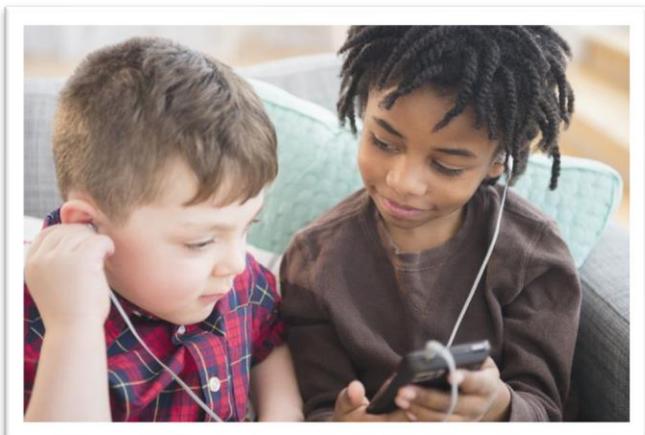
- Grabbing
- Pushing friends away
- Possessive attitudes and outbursts



Young children do not have an understanding of ownership. Their thinking could be: "If I give you my toy does that mean it belongs to you now? Will I ever get another turn with this toy?" Successful sharing skills includes the ability to understand three complex concepts:

- Another's perspective
- Personal boundaries
- Ownership

Teaching that sometimes it is okay NOT to share is just as important. All humans, young and old, need to have privacy and boundaries that others respect. They should not have to share everything with everybody.



## Parenting Strategies: Toddlers

1. Provide plenty of interesting objects to explore to reduce conflicts.
2. Distract toddlers by offering something else to play with or to do, or walk them to a new area to play.
3. Supervise closely to intervene quickly when your child tries to take an object from someone. Gently and firmly remove your child's hands and redirect to an available object.
4. Teach this very simple, concrete rule: If it is in someone's hands, the toy is not free to touch. "Josie has the ball in her hands, see? It's her turn now. There's another ball over there that is free to play with." Repeat this rule often.
5. Respect toddlers' interest in a toy. Teach holding boundaries. Let them fully explore an object until they are finished before they have it yanked away in the name of "sharing." Children are driven to explore. Once this need is fully met with enough time, they are much more likely to happily pass on the toy to another.
6. Teach how to hold boundaries. Step in to redirect other children who try to take a toy from your child. Return the toy to your child if it has been successfully pulled away. These actions teach a clear message: it's okay to have boundaries.
7. Invite your child to give the toy they have lost interest in to a child who is next in line for a turn. Usually toddlers have no resistance to doing this because they have had enough time to explore. Give them phrases to practice saying to each other and point out the positive impact of sharing, "Tell Sam, 'Your turn,' and hand it to him. Oh, look, Sam is smiling because you shared your ball with him!"

## Parenting Strategies: Preschoolers

- 1. Plan ahead:**
  - Have toys/activities available that encourage sharing like play dough, art materials, building blocks, cars on a car mat, or playhouse kitchen with lots of equipment.
  - With your child's input, store away toys that are too special to share before friends come over.
  - Meet up in neutral territory such as parks and local play groups.
- 2. Continue the same rule as with toddlers:** If it is in someone's hands, the toy is not free to touch.
- 3. Be fair and neutral.** When things are handled fairly, all humans are much more likely to share and take turns.
- 4. Negotiate turn-taking with toys.** Three-to-five year olds have the ability to talk through problems and to wait for a short period for their turn but will need lots of close supervision and coaching. Lower yourself to eye-level and model the words for turn-taking: "Sara, Jorge wants a turn. Please pass it on to him when you're finished." Over time, you'll ask Jorge to say these words for himself. **IMPORTANT NOTE:** Make sure that the toy is indeed passed on to the waiting child. Children will be much more willing to wait for a turn knowing that the plan will be followed through.
- 5. Refrain from judgmental statements** such as, "Don't be selfish" or "That's not nice," when children respond with, "No, he can't have a turn!" Try these tools instead (remember to speak at eyelevel):
  - **Empathy.** "You're having a fun time with that and don't want to give it up."
  - **Curiosity questions.** "Are you worried you won't get another turn with it?"
  - **Kind and Firm statements.** "This is a toy you agreed to let others play with."
  - **Go to solution.** "Let's work out a plan. How much longer would you like to play with it? 3 or 5 minutes? Should we set a timer for each turn?" **IMPORTANT NOTE:** While negotiating, an adult may need to hold the toy in question until an agreeable solution is reached. Children will be much more willing to negotiate if neither one of them has the toy in hand.
  - **Family Meetings.** Use family meetings to solve ongoing conflicts about sharing toys between siblings or friends. Put toys away until win-win solutions are reached by the family.
- 6. Acknowledge and appreciate the times you notice acts of sharing, asking for turns, and patient waiting.** "I noticed you gave her some of your drink. You're learning to share." "I appreciate you talking to your brother about your turn instead of grabbing." "Look, your friend is sharing with you because you shared with her!"
- 7. Find a protected place for older siblings to play that is out of reach from the little fingers of younger siblings.**
- 8. Set an example of the behavior you'd like to see.** "I'd like to share this with you; do you want some?" "When I'm done, would you like a turn?" "This item is very important to me; it's just for me to touch."

## Going Deeper

Sharing brings up the larger topic of boundaries. Learning to set guiltless boundaries and also to honor the boundaries of others are two vital skills for healthy human interaction. Children who grow up told not to be selfish and to think of others first may become adults who do not express their needs or feelings.

Overindulged children who are not made aware of their impact on others may become insensitive adults who push people away with their behavior. The goal is to work toward being skilled at both aspects of boundaries.

Practicing setting and honoring boundaries and modeling this to your child are your most powerful teaching tools. Additionally, you can:

- Set clear expectations about how you want an item used and returned. If these guidelines are not followed, remove the opportunity to borrow your things. At some point, allow your child to try again.
- Use family meetings for kids to discuss their feelings about sharing. Ask everyone to talk about when they've shared something and how it made them feel.
- Teach that sharing includes sharing time, feelings, and ideas. Invite children to share sad and happy moments from their day. Share your sad and happy moments.

### Key Steps

- Be fair and neutral.
- Have a good number of toys/activities available.
- Pre-plan by removing toys your child is not willing to share; don't require him to share everything all the time; respect his boundaries so he will learn to respect yours.
- Supervise closely, step in when problems arise.
- Give children a reasonable amount of time to explore a toy.
- Coach them through turn-taking.
- Don't engage in a power struggle when kids resist turn-taking; acknowledge the resistance and move on to a solution.
- Acknowledge thoughtful social skills you witness.
- Model sharing and model the right not to share. Set a family rule that we don't use things without permission.
- Use Family Meetings to address sharing issues and jointly come to a resolution.

