

## Sharing

Sharing is typically high on the list of what parents think that children should learn in the preschool years. In part this is because life is made much easier when children are with other children, either in the family or outside, when they have the ability and are willing to share.

Learning the range of skills needed to interact successfully with others is one of the major challenges of the first five years of life. Babies are born wanting and needing to relate to and communicate with others, but they are not born with the skills to do this. As they develop, what happens is that they come to have

- more and more ways of relating and communicating
- greater understanding of the effect of their behaviour on others
- increasing ability to empathise, that is, to put themselves in someone else's shoes
- more self control.

All of these are necessary to be able to share. No wonder it takes some time to learn!

We need to be clear about what sharing is. We could say that it is giving up to another person something that you want for yourself. That's important to think about, because many children in the second year of life hand things out to others – blocks in a basket for instance, a doll, or food. Parents may see that happening and mistakenly think that the child is sharing. Having seen it once, they then expect the child to always be able to share. This is in fact not sharing, but rather a game babies and toddlers play that could be called "Give it, take it back". Having handed things out, they are very likely to go around and collect them.

Some cultures are characterised by much more sharing than others. Interestingly, in the Anglo-Celtic culture, sharing is not nearly as prominent as it is in some other cultures. Remember that sharing is not the same as giving away something you don't want or need. We need to be careful that we are not expecting more of young children than we do of ourselves.

Sharing is especially hard when children are going through a stage of focusing on "me and what is mine", usually in the second and third years. Possessing is important at this stage. Sometimes a parent's tendency is to think that the harder it is for a child to share, the more they need to be pressured or made to share. In fact, quite the opposite is true. While sharing is a necessary skill to learn, for most children there are enough "built-in" opportunities or requirements to share during the day, so that it certainly isn't necessary to create additional ones. In fact, during the second and third years of life, the aim should be, rather than creating more occasions where sharing is necessary, to minimise them.

Forcing children to share too much too soon may in fact interfere with learning to share as they get older. As with so many other skills and understandings, expect that children will improve in their understanding and ability to share.

Some simple ways of encouraging children to share include the following:

- Allow them to put special belongings away if other children are coming over.
- Ensure that there is a variety of suitable materials and equipment to capture children's interest.
- Be available to help children negotiate the challenging business of sharing.
- Model and demonstrate sharing – remember that children learn much more from what we do than from what we say. That also means that if they are shared with, they will learn to share.
- Acknowledge and show approval of sharing when it happens and let the child know that it is something you value.
- Support the child who has given up something by helping him or her find something else to do.
- Don't expect too much.

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