

Teaching Children to Share

By Sue Grossman, Ph.D.

"Miss Harper! Miss Harper! Willard won't share the blocks! He has them all!" Emily cries.

Every early childhood teacher has heard similar complaints from young children. Many of us move in quickly to insist that the "greedy, selfish" child share some of the coveted item with the newcomer. Refusing to share is often treated as a crime in the eyes of adults. While our intention is good, we may be teaching children that others' rights are more important than their own and that problems should be resolved by adults rather than between the children themselves. We want children to be generous, kind, and cooperative, so we demand that they share.

Demanding that children share ignores their feelings and does not truly teach them to share. It more likely teaches children to feel angry and resentful toward adults and to believe that sharing is always accompanied by emotional pain. The irony of sharing is that when children know that they are not required to share, they are most likely to do so!

What is sharing?

Sharing is agreeably giving one's possessions to others. However, when a child is forced to give up his or her possession, it is not true sharing but rather surrender of property. When Miss Harper uses the office copy machine she is not required to interrupt her task and relinquish the copier to a coworker just because she has had it long enough. She may finish her task, even though the copier belongs to everyone in the building. Yet when Willard is using all of the blocks, engrossed in building a small city, some teachers believe it is their responsibility to make him relinquish what is at that time his property, because it belongs to everyone in the class.

Rather than label Willard as "selfish" or "greedy," the teacher should see his refusal as assertive self-protection. Forcing him to give up the blocks will only make him want to protect future possessions more energetically. Too often we take the side of the newcomer. Instead, we should give children choices. Miss Harper should give Willard the choice to share or not. There are many other activity options for Emily in a well-equipped early childhood classroom.

A Better Way to Respond

Miss Harper can encourage Emily to solve her own problem by responding, "Emily, you'd like some blocks. Ask Willard to please give you some as soon as he can." If Emily resists this suggestion, Miss Harper can go with her and give the message to Willard herself on Emily's behalf, thereby modeling one method of problem solving. Both children benefit from this approach. Willard learns that he has authority and control over the blocks, because he was playing with them first, and that his rights will be protected. He can be the one to decide when he is finished and ready to give up some blocks. When Emily must wait, she learns to deal with disappointment and frustration, two of life's realities.

Miss Harper might also say, "Emily, you want the blocks right now, but Willard is not ready to share them. I'll help you find something else to do while you wait." Such a statement makes Emily feel supported and understood by the teacher, not abandoned. When this strategy is used, children often do not have to wait long. Willard, given the power of authority, is eager to exercise his right to decide who gets some of the blocks and when. Soon Emily will hear him say, "Hey, Emily! You can have some blocks. I don't need them all."

Children Who Habitually Cannot Share

Occasionally there are children who head for the same material every day and refuse ever to give it up. Several approaches may be appropriate in this situation.

Consider why the child must possess this item. Children who come from large families or impoverished homes may feel a strong need to claim something as their own. Perhaps it is an object or material the child never has a chance to use outside of the classroom. A duplicate or equally attractive item can be provided for other children to use. It is important not to label this child as a "problem," but to try to understand the behavior and the child's need to possess the object.

Establish a system for equitable use of an item. Use a clock or timer to show children they can use the favored item for five minutes. A child might be allowed to ride the popular tricycle four times around the concrete track and then give it to the next person. If a system such as this is in place from the beginning, no child feels singled out.

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