

## Toddlers And Sharing: A Learned Skill

By Kathreen Francis

Anyone spending time with preschoolers knows that young children do not like to share. Babies who sweetly offer family members soggy Cheerios or a chewed toy quickly turn into self-absorbed toddlers who have discovered the thrill of their own voices and an almost instinctual protection of their territory. Sharing and cooperative play requires a combination of developmental maturity and learned skills- abilities that time, patience and positive reinforcement will eventually cultivate.

### Toddler Development

It is important to remember that what looks like selfish behavior on the part of a two- or three- year old is actually an important milestone in her growth. Discovering that she is a separate person, capable of forming an attachment to an object and then having the rudimentary skills to protect it is a source of developing self-esteem and a sense of identity.

Toddlers have little or no impulse control (depending on the natural temperament of the child) and it is unreasonable to expect them to go along happily deferring their own desires for the sake of another child. When toddlers protect what they perceive as theirs, they demonstrate normal behavior for their age- a growing awareness that they are separate beings, with some control over their experiences. These early behaviors, while often stressful, will help a toddler grow into a confident child. Caregivers and parents should consider this 'negative' selfish behavior as optimal teaching moments! This is the time to explain and model appropriate ways to communicate and cooperate.

Usually, toddlers engage in "parallel play." Children are happy to play alongside one another- watching, learning and enjoying the presence of other children, while continuing to be fiercely protective of their boundaries. Slowly, as children grow older, you will see occasional signs of "reciprocal" and cooperative play- these are your teaching moments- use them to guide your toddler into happy and congenial friendships with others.

What follows are suggestions to help the toddler through this trying, yet critically important developmental stage:

1. Remember that it is absolutely normal for a toddler to overreact to a real or perceived threat to 'his belongings.' There is no reason for a parent or teacher to worry that the child will grow up wild or without empathy. A child does not begin to consistently play cooperatively until at least 3, and often later.
2. Very young children emulate the people around them. Show them positive examples of sharing by using role-play. Practice this skill by turning it into a daily game- offering the child something of yours and encouraging him to do the same. Be sure to use the word "share" each and every time you exchange an item. Hopefully, he will learn that most of the time, sharing is fun.
3. Allow the child to have objects that he does not have to share. Even as adults we have boundaries- items that are dear to us and not things that we regularly part with. Children should have an item or two that they do not have to give up, even for the sake of peace.
4. Praise positive interactions. Even small exchanges, no matter how brief or unwillingly performed, should be acknowledged.
5. Try to engage multiple toddlers in activities that they can do alongside one another, separately. Clay, paint, items on a sensory table, and cars are examples of fun things young children can do as a group, but that don't require cooperation with one another. Make sure there are plenty of options and there will be few problems. Toddlers will learn to enjoy one another's company, without the sense of competition.
6. Insist that every toy shared, especially those most important to the toddler, are consistently returned. When treasured belongings are brought back to the child in a timely manner, she will fear sharing less and less as time goes on.
7. Toddlers sometimes engage in "proto-sharing"- offering a belonging to another without actually completely letting go. This is an extremely important stage of sharing development. Praise it every time.
8. Treat all children equally. Children, although ego-centric, have an innate sense about justice and fair treatment. Showing favoritism to some children will send signals to others that the situation may not be safe for sharing.
9. Children under the age of four have little or no understanding of the concept of time- asking them to let another person use their belongings "for five minutes" or just "for a bit" is absolutely meaningless. Perhaps a better idea is to set a timer or offer another visual signal to reassure the toddler that there are time limits.
10. Have plenty of toys available to each child- a sense of lack will create an urgency about specific items. Children will behave more generously when they are offered many options and have lots of freedom to choose among them.

It's important to remember that this difficult stage is normal — with appropriate direction and positive adult involvement the fierce territorial urges will become considerably less problematic. Anger, harsh discipline or embarrassment may actually escalate the problem, so be sure to use patience and loving guidance to encourage the child until sharing becomes a behavior with its own rewards.

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