

Share the Love: Teaching Your Child the Art of Sharing

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When parents are asked what they want for their children, having friends is often one of the first things mentioned. But developing strong friendships is often dependent on a child's ability to share, and sharing can be a challenging skill to learn.

As adults, it is easy to forget the complexity of sharing. It is a nuanced behavior. After all, in the grown-up world, we don't always say yes when someone asks to borrow something. You wouldn't lend your car or favorite sweater to just anyone but that doesn't make you selfish.

Sharing is an advanced skill which requires a child to use his or her self-control, empathy, and patience. Still, many parents believe that children should master sharing by the age of three. In reality, most three year olds will still require frequent support and reminders from you as they learn to share.

Children learn to share over time. Children generally develop a sense of ownership for their possessions between 24 and 36 months. At this age, children typically engage in parallel play – they will play next to each other rather than *with* each other. As children get older, generally between 36 and 48 months, they will *start* to truly give and take. But it is important to remember that sharing is an emerging skill in your toddler, he or she will still struggle with this complex behavior. It is not until children are older, between the ages of four and five, that they develop the self-control and empathy necessary to share regularly.

As you see your child struggle with this new skill, don't despair. You may not know it, but you have been teaching your child about sharing since he or she was an infant. As you took turns cooing back and forth with your baby, you were practicing sharing attention and taking turns communicating. As children get older, they become better at learning how to take turns with communication and they begin to understand that what makes them happy can also bring joy to others. Unfortunately, this joy is not always spread easily as the ability to recognize that others don't like or want exactly the same things (for example, just because I like playing princess doesn't mean everyone else does!) doesn't happen until roughly the age of five.

Activities and games can be used as effective tools to help develop the art of sharing. Activities for younger children can include toys that come apart or have multiple pieces so that more than one child can play with the same toy. Children can also practice sharing through simple games such as passing a ball back and forth or taking turns putting pieces into simple puzzles. Older children can engage in more complex games like drawing a scene where one child starts drawing a picture and the next person adds to that picture. Games like Simon Says or Red Rover are also helpful because they give children the opportunity to take turns being in charge. When playing collaborative games, it can be helpful to have children decide in advance whose turn is next and how to know when it is time to trade turns.

If your child struggles with sharing, utilize these games but, as children can often be unpredictable, practice with an adult or a more patient older child. Timers for how long each child gets to use

something before it must be passed on are also very helpful. You can experiment with techniques like using a special “sharing hat” that children take turns wearing to indicate whose turn it is or who gets to play with a certain toy. With all of these strategies, it is important to make sure your child is involved in determining how long the timer is set, when to change turns and so on.

Sharing activities don't have to be complicated or formal. Model sharing for your child. Reinforcing simple concepts, like “I am reading the paper now, and then Daddy will read it. We are sharing,” can be very helpful.

If your child is having a hard time sharing with others, there are many theories of intervention. Some theories espouse punishment for not sharing, while others suggest ignoring the behavior. Natural consequences can often be the best consequences for children who don't share. So, for example, if Bobby isn't going to share the blue crayon with his brother, then he is going to be forced to play by himself because other children don't want to play with someone who doesn't share. Children often respond to being isolated if they won't share.

If your child seems to have little reaction to this intervention, it may be helpful to put more focus on activities that reinforce the joy of sharing and giving of oneself. Give your child chores around the house so he or she can share in keeping the house clean. Ask your child for help or favors and let her know that her help is appreciated. Catch your child being good and praise him when he does share or plays well with his peers.

But most importantly, remember to be patient. Learning to share can easily provoke anxiety. Children don't always understand that the toys they share will be returned or that eventually their turn to play with something will come around. Continue to model sharing behaviors for your child, praise him or her for positive behavior and teach your child to see that sharing can be fun.

As always, if you feel that your child's social development is not comparable to that of other children his or her age, you can ask your child's MTC therapist for his or her opinion or seek a behavioral therapy screening. We would be happy to share our time with you and your child.