



So you want to know more about...

# Sharing

## Share and Share Alike

In order to **share**, children must first understand **ownership**. Children begin to acquire this concept between 18-36 months of age and apply it to things they want for themselves. *Mine! Mine! Mine!* Because children are egocentric, however, they are cognitively and emotionally unable to **care** if an object belongs to someone else. What looks like greed should not be taken personally. During this stage, adults' best tools are **distraction, redirection, and eliminating attractive nuisances**. You should keep children away from objects they can't have or find duplicates for them.

Children soon discover that ownership has privileges. The owner of an object gets to decide who plays with it. Children learn

to appreciate this fact, and eventually extend it to other's belongings, when we let them **act like owners**. Children under 3 should not be required to share their most precious belongings, even to make another child happy. You can ask, but they generally won't tolerate it for long, and the borrower ends up more frustrated than if they hadn't had any access at all.

Children who are 3 and older should be expected to act like responsible owners. They can keep track of their belongings, and should put them away if they're not using them. Help them understand that leaving "treasures" out invites others to play with them. If they want to use other children's belongings, point out the give and take of sharing. If they aren't willing to

share objects, they can't expect others to do so. Don't do all the negotiating and problem solving for them, but do help children find solutions. Make observations such as:

- Only one child can use that toy at a time. Maybe we need to take turns?
- How should we decide how long turns are?
- How will we know when it's time for somebody else's turn?

Stay close to offer cues when sharing disintegrates.

The best way to teach about sharing is to **model** appropriate behavior yourself, and to point out the benefits when you see incidental generosity.

## NAEYC on Sharing

Children who are kind, helpful, patient, and loving generally do better in school, and feeling good about oneself is an important aspect of developing desirable social skills. Tell your child how glad you are to be his parent. Set a good example for your preschooler by showing what it means to get along with others and to be respectful. Give children chances to learn about sharing and caring. For example, let them feed hungry birds, or help them make cookies to welcome a new neighbor.

From *Early Years Are Learning Years*, available online: [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org)

### Further reading

- *Gossie and Gertie*  
by Olivier Dunrea
- *It's Mine!*  
by Leo Lionni
- *That's Mine, Horace*  
by Holly Keller

# Ages & Stages

**Infants 6-12 months** are completely egocentric. If they see something they want, they think they should have it. They may imitate adult behaviors like sharing food or taking turns, but they do not understand what they are doing and can't be expected to do so in all situations. To help them, try **distraction**. Remove attractive nuisances from reach and from sight. Keep duplicates of popular items for siblings or playmates.

**18 –36 months:** Toddlers are still egocentric. They may recognize that an object is off-limits, but they can't resist temptation. They are beginning to understand ownership, but they believe that wanting something entitles them to have it. Hence the "MINE!" that's among many children's first words. To help them, keep duplicates of popular toys within groups. Allow children to keep a beloved toy throughout the day if they want to, rather than having them put it away at the end of an

activity. Give children scripts to use: "I want that." "I want a turn." "It's hard to wait." "I'm using this/not done."

**Preschoolers:** At approximately 3 years of age, most children understand the concept of ownership. They are still learning about taking turns and borrowing things. Because they are capable of empathy, they can identify with other children's needs. Children won't "master" sharing until they are close to 4-5 years old, but they should be improving noticeably. Help kids negotiate with other children or find acceptable alternatives. Help make waiting time more concrete (time is still a vague concept for them): "You are number three in line. You go after number two," or set a timer to help children keep track of waiting time. Ask children to provide solutions rather than deciding allotments for them. "How can we make sure everyone gets a turn?"

## Selfish?

Sometimes children who appear to be selfish or "greedy" may be more sensitive than others. We don't mean being sensitive emotionally (although that can also be true), but having keener sensory discrimination. For example, they may only want to eat from a particular fork because they like the way it feels in their mouth or it's easier for them to manipulate. Sensitivity isn't an excuse not to share, but it can make it more challenging.

When your child refuses to accept one object in place of another, ask yourself: what are the differences between the objects she rejects and retains? Is one easier to use? More attractive? Bigger? Softer? If you can isolate the deciding factor, use that to help you offer a better alternative. Sometimes there is no acceptable alternative. If more than one child wants access to the item, she may have to forego it for a while. Acknowledge her feelings, give her a time when she can look forward to using the item again,

## Frequently Asked Questions

**If you expect a child to share from the time he's a baby, won't he learn to do so?** Experience tells us that children who are forced to "share" are easily frustrated and likely to vent their frustration inappropriately. It is also harder for them to share once they acquire the cognitive ability to understand the concept, because they haven't yet experienced true ownership. This can cause them to lag behind their peers in social skills.

**If ownership is important for toddlers to learn, why can't my child bring his favorite truck to school to play with?** A cool new toy will attract other children who won't understand why they can't play with it, leading to frustration for everyone. Your child would

spend the whole day guarding his attractive nuisance instead of being able to enjoy it, and we would be unable to satisfy the other children's completely reasonable wish to play with the new truck.

**It's frustrating for my older daughter to have to share everything with her sister when it's not reciprocal.** Your older daughter shouldn't have to share everything. That confuses the issue of ownership for both children. For an egocentric toddler, however, seeing an exciting object may be too tempting. Your older daughter may have to keep some of her belongings out of reach or out of sight temporarily.