



What Can Young Children Learn About Sharing?

Get Real!

Most of the time, we allow our expectations for each child to vary according to our understanding of his or her unique developmental pace. But when it comes to sharing, grown-ups may hold expectations that are much less realistic! To adults, taking turns, or sharing, means cooperation and equal participation. But it has a far different meaning to a child. To a young child, taking turns means “I have to give up something, with the possibility of being left with nothing in its place!” To the child, sharing doesn’t seem fair! Yet sharing is important and necessary for children to learn as they grow and mature.

Understand Age-Level Characteristics

Expect that younger preschoolers will not understand much of what it means to share, or ways to share. Two-year-olds are discovering the boundaries between themselves and others. “NO!” and “MINE!” help them to describe those boundaries—and others’ rights are not yet understood! Since 2s are often involved in parallel play (alongside others but not with them), conflicts may be fierce but less common.

Three-year-olds are more likely to interact in play with others and “M-I-I-INE!” is still a familiar cry. When conflict arises with younger preschoolers, it’s usually more effective to distract a child than to talk too much. For instance, as Mia grabs Joe’s ball, describe what you see: “Mia, I see you want the blue ball.” Describe a solution: “It is Joe’s turn with the blue ball. Here is another ball for you to play with.” If you promise a turn with the blue ball later, be sure to keep your word!

Four- and five-year-olds are growing in social awareness. They also have more of a desire to please others and have grown both in their ability to wait and in their understanding that taking a turn means you get to keep it—but only for a while. Acknowledge and encourage children’s actions of sharing. “Dana, you shared the blocks with Bibi. Thank you! That is a way to be kind, just like our Bible says to do!”

Turn Ideas into Action

Let’s face it—taking turns, being kind and sharing are not concrete ideas! Adults understand them, but young children, these concepts are not grasped in a single class session (and certainly not through a lecture!).



So to make the idea into something understandable, it must be demonstrated—by us!

Describe ways to share as you demonstrate them. “Liam, I am cutting the apple into slices so that we can all share. Here is one slice for you and one slice for Etan.” When we model kindness and sharing, children see it as well as hear it. They learn far more than when we use words alone! For real learning to take place, examples and experiences must be repeated. Describe these experiences aloud to give children more ways to gain understanding.

To some children, taking turns will still feel like losing out. Because of a child’s natural self-centeredness and short memory, it may seem to them that their turn never comes! When you intervene in a dispute, remind them of times when you have seen them receive kind actions of others. “Nicki, Meg gave you first turn with the doll. She shared with you. You are sharing with her now. It is her turn. There will still be time for you to have another turn.” After Meg has finished with the doll, say, “Nicki, Meg had her turn. Now it is your turn.”

As you watch children peacefully involved in an activity together, don’t assume that you are not needed!

Watch carefully and give suggestions to help children think of ways to share. “Will, Hazel needs a truck. You have lots of trucks. What could you do to help her?” Keep comments and suggestions brief; children’s attention spans are short!

In an art activity, provide two or three of items such as scissors and glue bottles to be shared by four to six children. Large-scale art activities such as murals and collages help children learn to work side by side. While each child’s contribution will be unique, the child will enjoy feeling part of a group effort.



Block and dramatic play activities also provide children with opportunities to practice sharing.

Children will enjoy taking turns to stack blocks for a tower. The shared task of building a road will also help children learn to make decisions about how they will work together. In dramatic play, encourage activities such as cleaning house or preparing a pretend meal. Such tasks enable children to have fun while learning ways to help each other.

Expect that a child's willingness to share will vary from week to week.

This is a normal part of development. Solve problems in a matter-of-fact manner. "Mara, it's time to give Luis a turn. Maybe next week it will be easier for you to share. Giving a turn is a way to share, like our Bible tells us to do." Simply state the Bible principle; don't force the child—remember that you're helping to guide that child into success over time!