

Sharing: It's not child's play

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Have you ever had this experience?

Your small child is playing. When another child tries to take your child's toy, a loud, screaming conflict begins. You tell your child that he or she must share the toy.

If this has happened to you, you're not alone. As adults, we place a high value on sharing. We want our children to be well-behaved and to grow up with the social skills they need as adults.

If you think about it, the motto among small kids is "mine!" It may not be reasonable to expect them to share when they're very young because they're not developmentally ready.^{1,2}

How does forced sharing feel?

Imagine you're reading the newspaper and your spouse comes along and grabs it out of your hands because he or she wants to read it. How would you feel?

Now imagine four year-old Tom who's deep in play with a toy. Another child, Mary, comes along and tries to take it. Tom resists. What happens next?

Lessons about sharing

Many parents might say something like "Tom, you've had that toy long enough. Give it to Mary." Or, "Tom, don't be selfish; share with Mary."

But is that fair? Tom learns he must share just because someone else wants a turn – or when an adult tells him to do so. Those aren't very positive lessons.

The fact is preschoolers aren't ready to share. Sharing is a voluntary act of empathy and generosity. Most kids aren't ready to share until they're four or five years old.³ And even then, it can be touch and go.

How can parents help?

So what do you do when your child clutches a toy while another child screams for his or her turn? Here are some suggestions:

- 1. Before a playdate at your house, ask your child if there's a special toy he or she doesn't want to share.** Take that toy and put it away. This gives your child a sense of control over his or her own things.
- 2. Don't force sharing.** If another child wants to play with your child's toy, you might say to your child "It looks like Mary wants to play with that when you're done," or "When you're done playing, tell Mary because she's waiting for her turn."³
- 3. Waiting is just as hard as sharing.** For the child who has to wait for the toy, say something like "Oh! Waiting can be so hard."³ You can also try to get that child engaged in something else in the meantime.

Parenting is hard work. Try to set a good example of sharing. But also remember: Your kids will give and take turns when they're ready.

¹<http://centerforparentingeducation.org>

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/avital-schreiber-levy/is-sharing-really-caring_b_7198590.html

³<http://www.webmd.com/parenting/guide/4-to-5-year-old-milestones#2>