



## LEARNING TO SHARE

**Try these simple strategies to help your preschooler give and take cheerfully.**

by Ellen Booth Church

Sharing is an important process of growing up that we continue to learn and fine-tune, even in our adult years! As humans we are naturally possessive and protective of our things. However, over time we learn the pleasure of giving.

As a parent, you know that the ability to share a favorite toy, or time with a favorite person, can be a major accomplishment for your preschooler. In order to share, your child needs to understand that others have needs and wants, too. This happens developmentally when children begin to see that they are not the center of the universe (the egocentric stage), but one of many planets and constellations that work together to make up the universe! Here are simple ways to start teaching your preschooler about sharing:

**Demonstrate sharing yourself.** Sounds simple, but sometimes we forget that our children learn best from the model we provide. When you are sharing, be sure to explain to your child what you are doing and why; otherwise, he may be unaware of what is happening. For example, you might point out that it feels good to help out a neighbor by sharing a book or loaning yard tools, and that your neighbor appreciates it, too.

**Acknowledge sharing.** When your child shares a toy with a sibling or friend, commend him for it, but be specific in your choice of words. Too often we use the word "nice" to describe an action of sharing. But "nice" is a hard word to define, and is even harder for your young child to understand. Instead of saying, "Thank you for being nice to your friend," you can say, "Thank you for sharing your ball with Matthew. You made him happy."

If you have an only child, it is helpful to periodically take on the role of playmate so that she can have the experience of sharing a treasured object. (Plus your child will love playing one-on-one with you!) Allow her to take the lead as you have a tea party or pretend play with her baby dolls. This will empower her play behaviors. Use the opportunity to demonstrate sharing a toy with her, but be sure to verbalize what you are doing. You might say, "Would you like to share my blocks? We could build a tower together." Doing this gives her a model of behavior for when she plays with friends or relatives.

During the preschool years, your child is becoming capable of understanding the pleasure in sharing. But it is not until he sees the benefits of sharing that he will freely choose to do so. One benefit he can experience is the joy of interaction with a playmate or family member. He will find that it is more fun to share a toy with someone than to have it all to himself. That is because he is developing a sense of self in relationship to others. And in so doing, he is beginning to understand the importance of community.

Of course, that doesn't mean that he will always want to share. In fact, many times your young child may not. But through small successful experiences with sharing a toy or a snack, your child can begin to generalize these experiences with more friends and with objects of greater significance. For example, you wouldn't suggest that your child share his "blankie" or a favorite truck, but you could invite him to share his crayons.

Here are other activities that make it easy to share:

**Art projects**, such as painting, clay, collage and drawing

**Gardening:** The process of caring for living things together makes this a deep experience of sharing. Try planting fast-growing bean seeds in a yogurt container; share the responsibility for watering it.

**Meals**, even though sharing food is not always easy for a young child to do! Cut up a piece of fruit and count out the shared pieces. "One for me, one for you, one for me . . ."

**Giving simple gifts helps your child feel the joy of sharing.** Why not encourage your child to create a gift of love to share with a family member? It could be a coupon for a hug or a drawing.

**Informal ball games** — it is hard to play catch by yourself!

### **About the Author**

Ellen Booth Church is a former professor of early childhood education, an education consultant and author.