



TEACHING THE JOYS OF SHARING

by Laura Stanley

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Is “Mine, Mine, Mine!” a constant refrain in your 2-year-old’s speech? Read on to find out how even a tot can learn to share.

Allie Welsh and her best friend, Megan, both 2 1/2, played peacefully on the carpet as their mothers chatted nearby. The visit progressed pleasantly, as usual, until out of nowhere, “they both began tugging at a doll, screaming, ‘It’s mine, it’s mine,’ ” says Allie’s mom, Nancy, of Bellevue, Washington. “Finally, my friend had to hold the doll over her head to get them to stop.”

Sound familiar? Such encounters are routine in the life of a spirited 2-year-old. And, typically, when a quarrel erupts over a bear, book, or crayon, concerned parents -- who want their kids to grow up with friends and social skills -- implore their toddlers to share. But when you ask 2-year-olds to share, they usually have no idea what you’re talking about. “To ask a toddler to let another child play with a toy is to ask her to give it up forever,” says Carla Poole, a child-development specialist at Bellevue Hospital, in New York City.

By 8 or 9 months, many babies will happily hand food or toys to parents or siblings, so it may come as a shock that the baby you saw sharing just over a year ago now has a meltdown when another child touches a toy. According to experts, “Children under 1 have no sense of ownership and a limited memory and sense of time. When they give something away, they think the object no longer exists,” says Poole.

Two-year-olds, however, are a different story. “After the first year, children become aware of specific preferences,” says Poole. As far as they’re concerned, if they like something, it’s theirs. Two-and-a-half-year-old Hope Klein, of Scarsdale, New York, is no exception. “She thinks everything is hers,” groans her mother, Elaine. “If she’s looked at it or touched it, it belongs to her.”

But before you start extolling the virtues of sharing to your toddler, you must first readjust your own thinking on the topic. “Mine is often one of the first words toddlers learn and an intellectual milestone; once a child understands the feeling of ownership, he is on his way to learning to share,” says Alice Sterling Honig, Ph.D., a professor emerita of child development at Syracuse University. “Identifying ownership isn’t a sign of selfishness -- it’s a sign of knowledge. It demonstrates a desire to understand the world.”

Guiding a toddler to the point where she can share easily may take months; learning to share, like other refined social skills, takes time and requires constant attention. “Start as early as you can,” says Dr. Honig. “As soon as he starts saying ‘Mine,’ he’ll be able to learn the difference between what’s his and what belongs to someone else.” Here are ways to help your child master this sophisticated skill.

First, make sure your child has lots of playdates. "Children who have limited contact with other kids tend to have more trouble learning to share," says Susan Warford, coordinator of the Child Development Center at the University of Rhode Island, in Kingston. When it comes to sharing, practice makes perfect; playdates are an opportunity for your child to put her fledgling skills to the test.

During playdates, make sure you're not constantly telling kids to share. "Two-year-olds do better with hands-on examples," says Poole. "It's much clearer to say, 'You've had that ball a long time. Kevin's been waiting. It's time for his turn.'" Then, follow through: "When Kevin is finished with the ball, point out, 'Look, he's finished. You can have it back now.'" The lesson learned is thus twofold: Kevin has feelings like yours, and what belongs to you (or what you had first) will ultimately be returned. "Identify the conflict for your child," advises Warford, "and help him learn to negotiate by showing him how it's done."

Having lots of toys -- and duplicates of favorites-- helps prevent squabbles. Rebecca Kramnick, of Hoboken, New Jersey, remembers all too well when her daughter began grappling with her friends over toys on playdates. "Madeline's toy kitchen and mini piano were such sources of conflict on playdates, I wanted to throw them into the backyard," she says. The solution: Hide the piano, and keep the toy kitchen stocked with lots of pots and dishes. Remember that a toddler's anguish can be particularly acute if playmates touch her most precious things, like the bear she sleeps with or something that's special because it's new. Keep these treasures out of sight when you're at the park (or leave them at home), and have her choose a few favorites to tuck away before others come over to play.

Remember, too, to control the "grabbies." "If two children are fighting over a toy, you can't just let the stronger win," says Poole. She recommends putting the child's feelings into words for him. For example, say, "I understand that you want that toy right now. But Jessica wants it too. You can have a turn when she's finished." When a 2-year-old lunges for a parent's prized possession, like a piece of jewelry, turn the situation into a lesson on sharing. Let him look at it with you, but remind him that he has to treat it gently and that after he's finished looking at it, he has to return it to you.

Charity, of course, begins at home. Share with your husband in front of your child, point out when others share, and teach your toddler to thank children who let her play with their things. After lots of talking about sharing, Linda Coleman, of Swampscott, Massachusetts, noticed a big change in her son, Tommy, just before his third birthday. "He used to turn to me after a playdate and say, 'Mommy, did I share?'" A few months later, he was saying, 'Mommy, I shared.' He doesn't even bring it up anymore -- now it's just part of normal play."