



UNDERSTANDING "IT'S MINE!"

by Linda Bernstein

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Preschoolers may know the rules of fair play, but learning how to share can still be a major challenge.

Wouldn't it be great if you overheard your child say to one of his friends, "Sure, you can play with my favorite truck anytime"? Unfortunately, playdates that civilized are still years away. Three- and 4-year-olds tend to cling passionately to their possessions. "Preschoolers are so focused on their own wants and needs that sharing just isn't a priority," explains Ann Easterbrooks, Ph.D., chair of the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development at Tufts University, in Medford, Massachusetts.

Even though kids this age usually aren't eager to share, they can be surprisingly generous when adults encourage them and set a good example. "We had a big laugh the other day when my 4-year-old son, Gunner, said to his grandfather, 'I can't share your medicine, but you can have some of my apple,'" says Robin Schecter, of New York City. "We need to teach kids to share," stresses Donald K. Freedheim, Ph.D., founding director of the Schubert Center for Child Development at Case Western Reserve University, in Cleveland. "A child is like a foreigner who has to learn the customs of our country."

Possessive Preschoolers

While toddlers believe that everything is "mine," 3- and 4-year-olds usually understand that only certain things belong to them. Increasingly independent, they're developing a stronger sense of self—and tend to see their favorite items as extensions of themselves. As a result, they're naturally overprotective of belongings.

At first, kids share because their parents, caregivers, or teachers tell them to. In order to start sharing voluntarily, a child needs to be able to empathize—to understand, for instance, that a playmate yearns for a particular action figure just as much as he does. But this cognitive and emotional skill is just starting to develop in kids this age. Over time, your child will become more generous because it will make her feel good to see another child happy, Dr. Freedheim explains. She'll also realize that if she shares what she has with a friend, she's likely to get something back in exchange—a win-win situation. Here are some steps you can take to help the process along.

First, encourage your child to share with you. This will be easier because she knows you won't grab or have a tantrum. Frequently ask to play with a favorite toy, letting her know she can ask for it back.

Go to the playground. This is one of the best places to learn about taking turns because the equipment there doesn't belong to anyone. Your child will see that everyone gets a chance to go down the slide, and he'll realize that several kids can have fun in the sandbox at once.

Don't force your child to share everything. Before a friend comes over, let her decide which special toys or stuffed animals she wants to put out of sight. Knowing they don't always have to share makes it easier for kids to loosen their grip on toys the rest of the time, says Polly Greenberg, former editor of *Young Children*, the journal of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, in Washington, D.C.

Make sure there are similar-enough multiples of popular toys. That way, kids are less likely to desperately want something another child is playing with. Also, help them find a way to play together. For example, toy cars can integrate well with a train set—the “engineer” can stop his train while the cars pass at a crossing.

If you expect children to take turns, give them a warning—and then stick to it. Because preschoolers are increasingly concerned with fairness, they'll probably be receptive if you say, “Jeffrey can play with that puzzle for three minutes, and then Michael gets a turn.” It's best to set a timer because kids this age still have a fuzzy understanding of time, Dr. Easterbrooks says. When it goes off, there'll be no doubt whose turn it is.

While one child is waiting for her turn to play with something, help her find an interesting activity to do. You might help her play with puppets, give her a coloring book, or ask her to sprinkle food in the fish tank.

Teach the basics of negotiation. When a conflict arises, sit with both kids and talk about what to do. Instead of yelling, grabbing the toy, or giving up, your child might trade another toy for it, ask if he can play with it when the other child is done, or suggest that they play together.

Skip the lecture. If your child is frustrated because she doesn't want to take turns, she won't be receptive to a discussion about the importance of sharing. Try to distract her with another activity—and just remember that sharing is easier on some days than others.