

Sharing: It Comes Naturally



Parents watch in amazement as their child takes her first steps and begins walking. When the child is able to get around on her own, she begins exploring her world with enthusiasm—everything and anything looks fascinating to her. *Wow, look what I can do and get my hands on!*

It is around this time that parents start thinking about “socializing” their child by enrolling in toddler classes and organizing playgroups with other parents of toddlers. Now, imagine being in a room with other children the same age, and seeing your child make a bee line to the toy she spies and ungraciously ripping it out of the child’s hands that is playing with it! The other child is shocked and bursts into tears and your child is delighted to have gotten her hands on this fascinating object! How best to respond?

All parents want to raise children to grow up to be generous and caring adults. Because children learn by imitation, kind caring responses that are tailored to the child’s developmental stage teach children kindness and compassion toward themselves and others. If your child refuses to share or grabs a toy

and the owner wants it back, return the toy as diplomatically as possible without lectures or disapproval and find a replacement toy or way to engage your child in another fun activity.

The inner well-being of children under the age of three is based on the idea that they want what they want when they want it. Children’s minds are very different from adult minds, so expecting toddlers to have the social graces of adults will only back fire. Forcing children to share before they are old enough to choose it on their own causes resentment and teaches coercion as a model for making others do as you want. The best way to help your child to grow up to be caring and generous is not to pressure her into sharing too early. The toddler is acting in an age-appropriate way and not exhibiting anti-social personality traits that have to be immediately stamped out. This is not a sign that your child will remain self-centered into adulthood. This phase will be outgrown naturally if there is no interference.

Sometime between the ages of three and four, your child will want to share all on her own because she realizes that other children are more enjoyable than the toy. She will realize that generosity and patience are important in making and keeping friends. If you let your toddler behave in ways that are age-appropriate, then when it is time for preschool she should be ready to share and wait her turn for toys. So let your toddler be a toddler, their normal maturation will take care of the rest.

Tips for managing toddler playgroups

- All parents involved should recognize that it is normal for toddlers to refuse to share and to want to grab other children’s toys.
- Children who won’t share should not be made to feel badly or be forced to share.
- Children who grab will have to give the toy back if the other child is unhappy, but they should not be made to feel badly, and every attempt should be made to comfort them. For example, a parent might say, “I know how much you wanted that toy, but Alice is playing with it now. Let’s give it back and I’ll help you find something else fun to do.”
- Whenever possible, try to provide multiples of the most desirable toys. Or, if a particular toy provided the occasion for much squabbling the last time, put it away before the other children arrive.

Excerpted from *Smart Love Solutions in Early Childhood* and *Smart Love* by Martha Heineman Pieper, Ph.D. and William J. Pieper, M.D.