

DEVELOPING GENEROSITY IN YOUR CHILD

Sharing & Turn-Taking

Parents often want their child to learn to share with other children. When you have arranged a play date for your 4-year-old and her friend from school, why can't she just let her friend play with her toys so both can enjoy the time together? Will the friend's mother think you are a terrible parent if you can't get your child to share?

At SYC, we don't force children to share their toys during class. Why? One reason is that sharing is a concept most young children are not developmentally ready to understand. At age 2½, most children are not sure where their own body ends and other things, objects and people begin. So when holding a teddy bear, it's not readily apparent to a toddler that the bear is not a part of her own arm and hand.

An important task early childhood is to develop a sense of self. At ages 3 -5, children begin to understand that objects are not really part of them, but now they begin to feel how important certain things are such as a special blanket or toy. Dorothy Briggs in her book, *Your Child's Self -Esteem* says, *"Possession is one device the young child uses to hammer out autonomy. Consequently, ownership takes on special meaning to the toddler set. To them, separateness means the right to possess. Just as babbling comes before talking, so owning comes before sharing. To fully share, a person must FIRST fully possess. None of us can share what we don't have. And the little child needs time to get the feel of ownership thoroughly worked into his experience before he can let go."*

One way to accomplish this is to own —find out what is hers as compared to others. When a child won't share, she is affirming that she knows she is an individual separate from someone else. She wants adults around her to understand how she feels about her special things and wants us to respect her rights to her own possessions. This makes sense to adults when we think about our own special things that we would rather not share. For instance we might not want to lend our brand new car to a neighbor for a week or give a loan to a relative if we don't think it will be paid back. This is the kind of sharing that adults have a hard time deciding about and it's just as big a deal to a child. For children to get what they need at this point in their young lives makes it more likely that they will turn out to be adults who are generous in spirit.

Children can be taught to appear to share —sort of false sharing. Everyone has seen one child hand things over to another child when he's made to by an adult. Some adults use timers to control the use of a toy and when the timer rings, the next kid gets it whether he is done or not. The child learns to do what is required and it is easy to believe that he has learned to share because he quits arguing about it. But when these external rules aren't around, that same child will often fiercely guard objects/space/people/privileges because he never learned to feel full or finished enough so he can willingly hand it over to someone else or even be happy to let someone else enjoy it.

Eda Leshan, child psychologist and author of *When Your Child Drives You Crazy*, said, *"Generosity, a wish to share with others for mutual enjoyment, can be nourished only in a climate where a person's needs are understood and respected. When they're not, selfishness is inevitable. The most generous adults are not necessarily those with the most possessions but people who feel good about themselves, who feel loved and respected. The most selfish, on the other hand, may actually have a great many*

possessions, but if you look behind the fur coats and the fancy cars, you're apt to find someone with a need to hold on to things in the absence of love and respect."

Anything a child brings to school from home is considered personal and we won't ask a child to share it with another child unless she wants to. Teachers encourage kids to keep their special things in their cubby hole when not in their hands.

Our classrooms rules are that if Jimmy is playing with a school toy, he can use it as long as he wants. If Sarah wants the same toy, we will help her ask Jimmy if he is done. If he says no, then Sarah can ask to be told when he is finally done. Teachers coach children through this process until they can do it on their own. If Jimmy leaves the toy to play with something else, a teacher might tell Sarah "I see the toy you wanted on the floor now." If Jimmy comes back and says he wasn't really done, the teacher will offer to save something for him next time, but this time Sarah has the toy now.

It's hard to wait for a chance to play with something and teachers might help a child think about what she could do while waiting: "When it's your turn to play with this toy, you can have it as long as you want it and you don't have to give it to anyone else until you are done." After children go through this process a few times and see that we really will let them play with something for as long as they want, it makes waiting on something next time a lot easier. If a child gets upset about waiting, teachers help by coaching him to ask again if the other is done yet, by writing down feelings about waiting, or just sitting with the child and acknowledging that it's very hard to wait.

Sometimes it isn't even the toy that the child wanted in the first place. Often a child really just wants to play with the kid who has the toy! Teachers usually ask, "I wonder if you wanted to play with Jimmy too?" So it's important for us to notice what might be the real need of the child rather than just assuming the toy is the issue.

True sharing is about offering something willingly and from the heart. Preschoolers often actually DO share with each other if they feel full ownership and have been respected to make the decision to share on their own.

Learning to take turns is different than sharing, and it's a concept that CAN be learned in early childhood. Children in our program learn to take turns getting the attention of the teacher or other children as well as using toys and equipment. Our small groups help children practice taking turns speaking and listening because there is less competition than in group time with the whole class.

We often use lists to help teach about taking turns for special equipment like a rope ladder or trampoline. These lists help children wait, as they can see their own name printed under that of a friend and watch as names above theirs are crossed off. Besides helping children wait, lists offer lessons in literacy, sequencing and math.

Some equipment at school is open to use by all and can't be owned by one child. Our climbers, indoor and out are examples of equipment that is for everyone. Also we all recognize the issue of space and privacy. Sometimes children need to have a tent or a box all to themselves just to have their own space. This is especially important to children getting used to being in the midst of a large group at school. At home, children can get the feeling of ownership of space that no one else is allowed to go

into, even if it's just a sheet thrown over a table. All of us need a little privacy from others once in a while and respecting a child's need for privacy models this value.

All in all, children learn moral values like generosity from seeing them being modeled by the important adult role models in their own lives. Your family values will have a much larger impact on your children as they develop into adulthood than any other factor in their lives. Be sure to talk with your children about the times when your family chooses to be generous to others to help them understand why this is an important value to you.

...Stephanie Rottmayer, SYC Director