

# Kids' Holidays are for Sharing, not Surrender

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The holidays can be a truly magical time for parents of small children. It's a joy to experience the wonder of the celebration through their eyes, as they experience the brilliant decorations, festive music, delicious foods, and the special moments you and your family share.

Unfortunately, sharing is a concept your young child might not be ready to grasp. If you constantly force toddlers and other wee ones to let go of a toy, book or other objects they're enjoying before they're prepared to hand it over, they can actually become more selfish. If they feel they are constantly having cherished things taken out of their little fingers, gradually they develop an instinct to hold onto things tighter. Forcing them at holiday gatherings to share such treasures at a too-early age can lead to a tug of war, tears and full-on tantrums.

When it comes down to it, “sharing” isn’t the right word for what we ask young children to do. Expecting them to immediately hand over a cherished object immediately upon request isn’t sharing—it’s surrender. It’s not realistic for small children any more than it is for adults.

Picture yourself with a power drill in hand, putting up new shelving in your living room, when a neighbor drops in and says, “Nice drill—can I borrow it?” Ideally, you would say, “Why, of course, neighbor! You can have it when I’m done with it!” You’d finish skilfully hanging the shelves, then bring your drill over and lend it to them.

Now, if you treated this sharing situation like we do sharing among toddlers, you’d instead instantly hand over the drill and leave your snazzy new shelves just hanging off the wall, half-finished. That doesn’t make any sense for adults, so why should we place unrealistic expectations on our children when it comes to sharing?

I’m a big fan of the book “It’s OK Not to Share.” Author Heather Shumaker suggests teaching that when your child is asked to share, they act as the adults in the drill situation above do. Instead of immediately relinquishing the thing in question, they tell the other child, “Yes, I will let you have this when I’m done.” This really resonated with me when I read it. I was a shy, quiet kid myself, so I’ve always identified with the meeker kids, the ones who don’t rock the boat. Rather than assert themselves when another child demands they share, these gentle souls typically hand the toy over before they’ve had a chance to use and enjoy it. I feel sad for those children.

Because I identify with less-assertive children and want them to have a chance to enjoy things, I’ve taught my children to share after they’ve had a chance to enjoy the toy, book or other objects. I’ve also brought that philosophy into the classroom at Stepping Stones. It’s a wonderful opportunity to teach your child to speak for himself. The message they’re sending is not, “No, I won’t share!” Instead, it’s, “Of course I’ll share it with you when I’m finished.” That’s a perfectly reasonable statement for a child to make—one other children will take on board.

Once, when my Archie was four, he finally got his turn on a big, cool bike after patiently waiting. Of course, he had been on this awesome bike for all of 5 seconds when a more assertive boy came over and said, "My turn!" Archie, as he was taught, said, "I just sat on it, so I'm going to take my turn." I was very proud. Unfortunately, the other boy hadn't been taught that way of sharing. He started whining to his mother, "It's not fair—this boy won't share!" His mother came over and told me, "You need to teach your kid some manners. It's not nice not to share." Apparently, some adults need to learn the advantages of delayed sharing. At least I was confident enough in my parenting to hold firm.

Teaching your child to share when they're ready imparts them with a number of important life skills and lessons:

- Patience. Learning to get used to delayed gratification, rather than instant, will serve them for years to come (actually, I know some adults who could stand to learn this skill).
- Security. While the instant-surrender view of sharing can make young children more possessive, the delayed-gratification model gives them a sense of security—they don't feel everything they like could be taken away at a moment's notice.
- Self-assertion. When you equip your child with the language they need to tell the other child they will share when they are ready, you're helping them learn to advocate for themselves in a way that's more likely to be heard than to cause tears.

The holidays are prime time to prepare your child to share. They are thrown into family gatherings with cousins, family friends and other children roughly their age. They may have in hand a recently opened gift that other little ones might have their eyes on and want to share. It's a good idea to have an instructive conversation with your little ones about how to share, and how to assert themselves, before you head over the river and through the woods to that holiday party. Then, they'll be ready.

Christmas, Kwanza, the winter solstice and other seasonal celebrations are a time for family, feasting, celebration and, yes, sharing. If you teach your children how to share in a way that lets everyone have their turn at the fun, their holiday will be much more merry and magical.

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