



# To Share or Not to Share

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Humans are social creatures, and **learning how to interact and connect with others is possibly the most important part of a child's development.** One of the functions of early-years education is to provide a safe and supportive environment for learning and practicing social skills, including

- Conflict resolution
- Communication
- Empathy
- Respect
- Cooperation
- Self-regulation/ self-control

Perhaps this explains why so much importance has been placed on teaching children to share. The act of sharing is one of the ways a person can increase their acceptance and popularity with their peers, and as parents and caregivers, we take that very seriously.

## Do as I say or do as I do?

But let's stop for a moment and think about what we are asking when we tell our children "nice children share", or "let your friend play with your toy" or "you've been on the swing long enough, it's time to share". Would we expect the same level of compliance from adults? What if a friend asked to borrow your new hairdryer or your food blender? Would you hand it over without a second thought? What if you were in the middle of using it? And perhaps you've lent out something before which got damaged or lost, do you still want to "share" your gadget?

## Turning the issue upside down

There is a book that I highly recommend called "**It's OK not to Share**" by Heather Shumaker, which explains how our children can be empowered without losing any of their compassion and empathy. This seems to go against popular opinion, but when you dig deeper into child psychology and how preschoolers experience the world, it makes a lot of sense: forcing a child to behave in a certain way builds resentment, as well as a sense of helplessness since someone else is making the decision.

Forced sharing encourages bullying and disempowers the quieter children who are used to doing as they are told. The overall result is a child who learns that sharing is annoying, maybe even traumatic. This is especially true for toddlers who barely know how to regulate their own emotions, let alone take someone else's into account!

Interestingly, proponents of forced sharing state that children learn about compromise, fairness and coping with disappointment through being encouraged to share even when they don't want to. But there is a growing school of thought that it actually works the other way around. By giving control over sharing to the children themselves, they learn to be more assertive and gain a sense of autonomy, and the waiting child has to practise delayed satisfaction.

## Making it work

When it comes to the practicalities of managing both children when the second child demands the use of the first child's property, there are several techniques which can help, which we use every day.

1. Consistency: the aim of this methodology is to empower children and give them a sense of security that their choices will be respected. By remaining consistent (even with a distraught child insisting that they NEED the item RIGHT NOW!) we help both children to take responsibility for their own actions and feelings. Changing the rules makes it more likely that the first child will cling more tenaciously to the item.
2. Validation: once again, this applies to both children. The first child should be validated for choosing to keep hold of the item, and the second child should be validated for the

frustration and upset that result from the delay.

3. Communication: what we ultimately want for our children is to be able to manage relationships, to be able to advocate for themselves and to feel empathy for others. If the waiting child is calm enough, let them express what they want and allow the first child to respond. You might be surprised by the results!

4. Creativity and adaptability: consistency is important, but children are also open to the fact that there are different rules for different scenarios, so in the classroom and at home, they can take as long as they like with an item, but in the park, they might need an extra rule such as “only 5 minutes on the swing if others are waiting”.

At Stepping Stones, we teach our kids that when it comes to sharing, they have the right to say no. We want our children to learn to be kind and generous, but it is much more meaningful when they understand what it means to share with others, and actively choose to do so. Being forced to relinquish something is not true sharing, merely complying with an instruction, and instead of teaching generosity, it teaches children that they have no control over their property or the items they are using. When you have full permission to keep something for as long as you want or need, and then voluntarily hand it over to another person, that is the true meaning of sharing.

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