

Encouraging Kids to Share

By Marilyn Suttle

Sharing is an important skill for children to learn. It would seem logical that to teach children to be kind, we must use kind methods. Yet, kindness goes out the window as frustrated parents find themselves yelling, threatening or forcing their children to share their toys. Why all the trouble? Because sharing can be a difficult thing for kids to do. Here are some helpful ways to encourage kids to share.

Understand When Sharing is Age Appropriate

A toddler is not developmentally ready to understand the concept of sharing. Distraction is a useful tool when dealing with a younger child. When it's time to give that stuffed animal back to an older sibling, avoid conflict by diverting the child's attention to another toy or activity. Children develop at different rates, and many are not ready to understand sharing concepts until around age three.

Give Children Permission Not to Share Some Things

If you believe that your children should be willing to share everything, consider this: Do you own anything that you're not willing to share? Would you be happy to let a neighbor borrow your diamond ring, or your underwear? Allow children to own special things that they don't have to share. When friends are coming over, ask your child to put away any toys that are too difficult to share. Knowing that some toys are off limits to friends and siblings helps a child to share the other toys. With siblings, set aside a box, shelf or closet for each child to keep their special toys in. Those toys are only for sharing when the child gives permission.

Do Not Force Children to Share

Forcing kids to share creates negative side effects. First, when children are forced, they naturally resist. They hold on tighter to their possessions. Second, they feel resentment toward the child they have to share with and the parent who forced the sharing. "It's not fair! That truck is mine," your son screams as you pry the toy out of his hands. The good feelings we hope to create through sharing are replaced with hostility and helplessness.

Identify their Struggle

When a child resists sharing, it is helpful to identify how difficult sharing can be. For example, "Sometimes it's not easy to share your Barbie dolls with your cousin." By acknowledging the difficulty, kids feel less threatened and more capable of considering the idea of sharing. When you see the kids struggling over who gets to hold the kitten first, say, "This is a tough situation. I see two children and only one kitten." The kids clearly hear their problem defined without judgment. This puts them in a better position to work out a solution for themselves.

Let the Kids Decide How to Share

When children are put in charge of sharing, they feel important and in control. They are also more likely to follow through on decisions they get to make. In many families, the kids fight over who gets to sit in the front seat of the car. A parent might think it's best to decide how the kids will share, for example, "Clark is the oldest, so he'll sit in the front seat first." When we

decide, the kids are learning nothing about working out their own solutions. When the kids decide how to share, it builds good feelings between them. We can ask them to decide by saying, “Kids, I know that all of you like to sit in the front seat of the car. Instead of fighting over it, you’ll need to decide how to share the front seat in a way that is fair to each of you. Please let me know what you decide before we leave for the library.”

Make Suggestions Without Taking Over

Parents have a lot of good ideas. When kids can’t figure out how to share on their own, let’s suggest those ideas, leaving the final decision up to the kids. Resist making the final decision, such as, “I’m setting a timer. When it rings, it will be Jacob’s turn.” Instead, suggest your idea but leave the decision up to the kids. A statement like, “Some kids like to set a timer to know when their turn is up. You can do that or think of another idea you can both agree to,” works well. By leaving the final decision up to the kids, they are more likely to own the solution and feel good about sharing.

Show Kids What Sharing Looks Like

Parents share with their families all the time, but how often do they point it out? Kids can learn about the benefits of sharing by your example. Next time you come home with a box of donuts, tell the kids, “I brought these home to share with everyone. Isn’t it fun to share a treat together?” The library and book stores are filled with resource which show sharing. Read books, watch videos, and point out articles in the newspaper about people who share with others. Your example will lead them.

Marilyn Suttle shows you how to create happier family and work relationships. She is a dynamic speaker, author and columnist. Subscribe to her FREE monthly e-newsletter: Life in Balance: Thriving Kids/Thriving Parents, by visiting her web site: WWW.SuttleOnline.NET. © 2005 Suttle Enterprises LLC.