

Teaching children to share and take turns

Early Years Team

When is it developmentally appropriate to expect a child to share?

Before Age Three

Very young toddlers do not understand the concept of sharing very well. Before the age of two it is not appropriate to expect a child to share, as they are not developmentally able to do so.

By around age two, children can usually understand the concept of ownership and will protest their own toys being taken away, more than neutral toys. But they have very little understanding of how others think. They therefore do not have empathy for what the other child wants. They may be able to accept exchanging a toy with a lot of adult support, but will struggle to wait or share a single item.

Age Three to Five

Around this age children become much more interested in playing together rather than 'parallel playing' next to each other, so sharing suddenly becomes relevant: a child who does not share might find that their friend is reluctant to play with them. Children are also starting to develop the capability to understand what others think and want and can take a short break from their own play to consider that another child might want the toy they currently have.

Their concept of time is evolving over this period too; at around age three they might still be focused entirely on the present and cannot foresee "five minutes from now" when they can have the toy.

At about this age, they are also developing some impulse control: the ability to wait and not just grab what they want, which is an enormous help with sharing. Parents can scaffold this ability by empathising: "I know you want to play with the truck. Maria has it right now. It can be hard to wait. When Maria has finished, you can have the truck." You can also suggest other toys the child might want to play with while they are waiting.

Remember when we are working with children with SEND, they are developmentally younger than their actual age, so we need to think about that when we have expectations about them sharing.

Three stages to teaching sharing

1. exchanging the same object

This stage is getting a child to exchange one object for another that is the same. When this is done, the adult should exchange or swap and praise the child when they release the object they have.

2. exchange for a different object

When they are happy to swap for the same object move on to swapping for a similar object i.e., it may be a different colour. You can gradually build up on how different the object is.

3. sharing or turn taking with a single object

Once swapping is well established in lots of situations, you can introduce the wait for a single object. Initially you may need to practice the wait with a physical wait card i.e. you swap the object for a wait card. This is done with an adult and the wait is very short, maybe count to five or ten. You can gradually increase the wait time as the child begins to trust the item will be returned, and eventually the wait card could be replaced with just the word. Some children like a timer that is set so they can see or hear when the other persons turn is over. This again supports them while they wait for their turn.

Some top tips

Don't expect children to share their favourite or special toys. We would not share our Important objects - would you share your wedding dress?

Be trustworthy - if you say it will be your turn in one minute, you need to stick to that. Do not get distracted - do you share with a neighbour who never returns your tools?

Model the behaviour you want, draw attention to you sharing with others or praise other children sharing well.

Encourage and explain empathy for others' feelings in all situations. To truly share you need to have empathy. This does not develop in most children until around five, but we can help it with some clear teaching.

Remember all children develop at their own pace. Some children take more practice at this skill than others.

Video Links

[How to Teach Sharing in 3 Stages - YouTube](#)