

## Teaching Your Child to Share

By: Karen Putzke, M.Ed.

Author of *Midnight the Cow Learns about Sharing*

If you have been a parent for more than 2 years, chances are, you will be able to relate to this: at a local mall in the play area, your child jumps into the little play car, successfully pushing the child that was already in it right out of the way! That poor little guy starts sobbing and running to his mommy and your little gal has that look of satisfaction; clearly she conquered what was rightfully hers. After you allow yourself two seconds of shock that *your* child would actually do *this*, you walk briskly over to her lecturing the pitfalls of her actions. He was there first; you'll not have friends if you treat them like THAT; you must share; you don't own the play equipment; and so on. Your child looks at you with confusion for a brief moment, then scampers away.

Of course you want your child to develop social skills gracefully. And, of course you want the know-how to help the little one do just that! It is important to take into consideration age-appropriate expectations and reactions to their behaviors. For example, a two-year old enjoys playing with adults more than children. He may like playing with other children when adults are nearby, which is important, because he may also kick, grab, bite or push to avoid sharing or to get what he wants. About the age of two and a half, he begins to interact more with peers in parallel play. This means that he may be playing with similar toys next to other children, but not with them. Smiles and laughter will accompany his social interaction and dramatic play develops nearing the age of three. At this time, the habit of sharing begins to develop, but remains difficult for the little fellow.

This is where you come in. Sharing is something that must be learned. One strategy you can try is role playing with your child. Engage in play with your child using a toy he likes. Talk to him in simple terms about sharing. Ask him for a turn to play with the toy. Sometimes just saying, “It’s Mommy’s turn” does the trick. Then play with the toy for 10 or 15 seconds and then exclaim, “It’s your turn again!” If he doesn’t willingly share, say, “I’m going to set the timer. When the timer goes off, it’s my turn.” Of course, his turn can be longer than 10 or 15 seconds. And you should increase your time a bit the next time, too. The goal is to get him thinking about taking turns and sharing a toy.

When your little angel is going to have company, be sure to prepare her for the occasion. Tell her who’s coming and then have her choose some toys that she and her friend can use during the visit. Let her know that her friend will be playing with these toys as well, and that’s okay. Tell her, “It’s good to share with your friends and to take turns with toys like you and I did.” Reminding her of your role-playing experiences will increase her success in the “real world” of play. Also, if there are special toys that you *know* your child would be reluctant to share, be sure to put those away ahead of time. You can also teach your gal to trade one toy for another. If the visiting friend is playing with a toy that your child wants, you can suggest she make a trade for it. “What toy can Janice play with?” Of course, Janice may not want to give up the toy, in which case, go back to turn-taking.

Provide many opportunities for turn-taking during playtime and give feedback to your child (and others) for appropriately sharing and waiting their turn. If the activity is filling up buckets with sand and the children have to share a shovel, give it to one child and say, “Okay, put three scoops in.... One...two...three! Janice’s turn!” Then say the

same thing for Janice. They'll get the idea and a quick word of specific praise ("I like the way you gave the shovel to Janice once it was her turn!") will go a long way in reinforcing what you are teaching.

Just remember to be realistic with your expectations. Much of what annoys us as parents is normal in a developing child. And just as you are your child's first teacher in language development, you also are in the realm of social development. Don't forget how important *your* behavior is in teaching your child, too. We all have behaviors that we'd rather our child not imitate. Be careful! They're watching you to learn how *you* handle certain situations. Perhaps we could all use a little social refining!