

Teaching Your Child to Cooperate

By: Karen Putzke, M.Ed.

2, 4, 6, 8 – Come on, let's cooperate! I'm sure you've felt like a cheerleader of sorts when dealing with your child, just as I have with mine. Most parents would agree that we have certain life goals for our children– to live comfortably, to contribute in a family, a community, and even beyond that, and to have a satisfying position within their worlds, just to name a few. One life skill that all children will need to develop in order to reach these goals is cooperation. Cooperation is a basic life skill that helps us productively work in groups and relate amicably with others. Just as it is a coach's job to help an athlete gradually develop his musculature and stamina so that he'll be ready for that big game, it is the parents' job to model cooperative behavior and nurture a cooperative spirit in our children.

Just how much cooperation can you expect? That will depend on your child's age. For example, your toddler may have a way of drawing a penalty flag for "roughing the parent," or "job interference." While she is starting to predict the consequences of her behavior, she asserts herself in sometimes a not-so-nice fashion.

So let's say your active two-year-old daughter wants desperately to play outside, but you're still handling dish duty. She cries and begs you to take her outside, tugging on your leg twenty-two times. Instead of punishing her for her "rude" behavior, elicit her help. Say to her, "We have to get these dishes dried and put away before we can go outside. Let's do this together!" Give her a plastic bowl or colander to dry and put away. Give her lots of praise when she does it and let her know how much she's helping. When the job is complete tell her, "Now we can go outside because we worked together!" She'll get the idea of cooperating to reach a common goal.

A preschooler's understanding of your expectations is growing; however, do not expect a completely cooperative three-year-old. He still believes his needs and wishes come first, but he's becoming more rational. You can begin to teach him how to cooperate to solve a problem. A team huddle approach may just be the key.

First examine the problem, then briefly brainstorm possible solutions. If possible, allow your child to choose a workable solution from one or two possibilities and follow through. For example, your little guy has his toy trucks all over your kitchen counters and it's time to start dinner. Tell him, "I can't cook dinner with your trucks all over the counter. What shall we do?" He may respond, "But they're racing!" Make a suggestion like, "Perhaps they can race on the porch. They might even go faster there." He may think of an even faster "track" for his trucks.

A five-year-old's ability to predict consequences and look at cause-and-effect relationships will enable you to foster her cooperative spirit even more. If your daughter knows that Good Behavior A will lead to Reward A, then she will happily complete that behavior, most of the time, anyway. For example, Sweet Sally knows that she has to pick up her toys before going swimming. If you are consistent with that, chances are, you may notice Sally picking up her toys before she even asks you about going swimming. Conversely, she will learn quickly that if she passes on her chores, she's not going to score anything for her lack of labor.

Children should have household responsibilities assigned based on their age. This is an important lesson in cooperation. Even young children can learn that everyone's help is needed in order for the family to be successful. Let them know that they are a valued member of your family. It's a team effort!

Make sure you model the actions that you want your child to imitate. A child will follow your example when they see you cooperate with your spouse, your in-law, or your neighbor. Point out the obvious to your young child. Say, "Did you notice how I helped Daddy bag up the garbage? You'll be able to do that too when you get a little older." Be sure to notice and discuss other people's acts of cooperation. "Oh, did you see how Joe helped Mark rake the leaves? They worked together to get the job done! Now the yard looks so nice!"

Continue to give suggestions about how children can cooperate with family members, friends, teachers, and others. Work in your vegetable or flower garden together or do an art project together. Let your child know that if his teacher is busily stacking chairs at the end of the school day, his help would probably be greatly appreciated (asking permission from the teacher first, of course).

Remember, children will develop skills and understanding gradually. In fact, think of the last time that you had to hone your cooperation skills in order to get along with that difficult co-worker or that complicated cousin. Probably not too long ago, was it? By example, practice, and nurturing, your child and mine will have the opportunity to learn cooperation skills that will benefit them for a lifetime. It truly is a team effort with you being your child's most important coach and cheerleader.

Note: Karen Putzke is a local parent, children's book author, and educator of children with special needs. She is currently writing a series of children's books teaching good character. Her current books are entitled: *Midnight the Cow Learns about Sharing* and *Midnight the Cow Learns about Cooperation*. You can order Karen's books, view ideas and activities for children, and learn about her upcoming events on her Web site: www.midnightthecow.com.