

Mine, Yours, and Ours

Sharing is a very big parenting issue during play dates, between siblings, and at various events that involve children and families coming together to play. The very young child does not understand the concept of sharing. Parents want their children to play and share easily with others. What is the best way to address this issue? How do we help children to develop the ability to share?

It helps to remember that adults often do not like to be told share either. Imagine arriving at the grocery store, selecting a grocery cart and beginning to fill it with your weekly grocery items when another shopper came and took it exclaiming that it was really his turn with the cart and that **you** had already had a **really long turn**? How would you feel? What if your request for help from the manager was met with her insistence that you be kind and share the cart? Would you feel that your rights had been respected? Would you begin to develop an innate desire to share with others? Why do we so often think this method will work with our children?

Before children can begin to share they need to know that their right to ownership will be respected. The first step in this direction is supporting the child in his or her strong claim of “**Mine!**” Letting children know that they will be supported and protected when another child tries to take their toy builds trust between the child and the caregiver. A child who is supported in keeping his own toy will be more understanding when caregivers support the rights of the other children as well. The idea of “**yours**” is the second step toward sharing and the first toward respecting the rights of others. A child who knows that just caregivers will support everyone fairly during conflicts over ownership feels safe in the environment. This child will begin to explore the idea of “**ours**” by inviting others to join in play, letting other children know when the contested toy is available, and by accepting invitations from caregivers and children to play together.

In the Montessori environment children spend a good portion of the day in free activity. Children have many opportunities to choose materials from the shelf and work alone or in small groups. The freedom to move about and make choices creates an atmosphere which invites social interaction. In the environment we do not provide one of each item for every child. In fact, scarcity of materials (two sets of markers instead of ten) is an important element in creating a community of children who interact and learn to resolve conflicts together. Real sharing occurs every day when one small child is excited about digging, reading, singing or building with another.

At home and in other social settings there are several ways you can support your child in sharing. When other children are coming to visit, remind your child that they will be coming to play with his or her toys. Help select the toys he or she feels comfortable sharing. Put away special toys that are difficult to share. If your child is really struggling with sharing, it helps to have a few toys of your own that you are willing to share with the visiting child! Let other parents know that your child is too young to understand sharing, and that you are helping him or her learn. In settings where other parents feel that sharing is important it may be helpful to acknowledge differences.

