

Sharing and Caring in Young Children

1/2008

The ability to share and take turns takes a long time to develop in a young child. We all desire for our children to be generous individuals. I don't know any adult who wants to hear that their kid "won't share". We take this very personal. For young children, all the worlds' focus is on ME. There is no doubt in the mind of young children that even the very forces of nature are somehow centered on them. To understand this we must try and place ourselves inside the mind of a young child and see what they are ready for and what they simply cannot yet do. Let's consider the following analogies.

ANALOGY #1: You have just purchased a new car. As you drive you begin playing around with the lights, windshield wipers and sound system, making some mental notes of the differences between this vehicle and the last one. You'll wait till later to read up on the navigational system and warranties. As you pull up into the driveway a few neighbors stroll over. As you get out of the car they begin to move closer to the car, running their hands over the rooftop and hood, they kick at the tires, lean into the windows and feel the upholstery. You carefully close the windows and lock up the car moving toward your front door with the owner's manual in hand. Then you hear, "Can I drive it? C'mon, give me the keys. Just once around the block, OK? Let me drive it, too!" You politely shake your head 'no,' pointing to the owner's manual and keep walking to the door. But behind your back you can hear, "Man can you believe that? He wouldn't let us drive it. He let me borrow his lawn mower just last week. I can't believe it, he won't share!"

ANALOGY #2. You found a cake recipe in a magazine that you have been waiting to try for some time. You finally have a few spare moments and you begin. You gather all the ingredients including the last 3 eggs. As you write EGGS on the grocery list, a family member enters the kitchen and grabs the 3 eggs. "I'm using those," you say. "No, you're not. I want to make myself some scrambled eggs." "I'm using those for a cake," you respond, " I need 3 eggs." "You didn't have them in your hands, so, you're not using them. I can take them because I need them. You need to share." Voices are beginning to rise when another family member enters. Someone with more authority it seems. "(S)he won't share". "But I'm making a cake". It goes back and forth like this for a while and finally the third family member says, "You need to share. That is what we do in this family. You'll just have to figure something else out." You are handed one egg.

In both situations, you can feel some unfair reactions and responses to the main character. Imagine this is a 3-4 year old child. Children are egocentric. This is not the same as selfish or self-centered. They

simply are the center of their own universe. In the first analogy the new owner has hardly had enough time to really 'own' the new car. What if someone gets into an accident? Or steals it? In the second analogy, although our chef was not holding onto the eggs physically, (s)he was certainly holding onto the eggs mentally. The eggs were a part of a plan.

This happens frequently with children. They have several toys set up. They cannot possibly hold onto all of them physically but they are certainly part of the child's play scheme. When another child moves into the play the second player may or may not have the same understanding as the first child or what we call "shared understanding". This again is where much conflict arises between children. One child has one idea and the other child has a different idea. Our goal is to help bridge this gap by allowing the first child to tell others what they are playing and what they expect from others. Others have the choice to contribute to the play or find another activity.

I have seen well meaning adults force children to share. But this is not sharing, it's forcing the child to relinquish their own sense of power. Young children need to develop a healthy sense of power and control. This is different from having power OVER someone. Such as an adult taking something from one child and giving it to another and now "you're sharing". Developing a healthy sense of personal power enables a child to set healthy boundaries around him or herself. Children who are forced to share, forced to relinquish their own sense of power over and over again, develop a skewed sense of power, and can turn into our worst nightmare—a bully.

Providing children with opportunities to NEGOTIATE with one another over space and stuff is more effective and useful over the long term for everyone. It's hard for young children to take turns. We have to set that up for them. Typically they cannot do that for themselves. They are simply too young to get it. In their minds if they had it yesterday or even a few minutes ago, it is still theirs. Even if they move on to play with something else and come back finding someone else with 'it', 'it' is still theirs, and boy, that can get ugly. No amount of reasoning will convince them otherwise. So, we need to help them.

"Ask him/her if you can use it when s/he's done." (But I want it)

"And I want you to have it. But ____ is using it right now. Do you want me to ask for you? I will if you need me to."

This example provides both children with personal power. One child uses the toy until satisfied, which generally is a very short time. And the other knows that they will have it next.

Young children have an underdeveloped sense of time and ownership therefore the whole idea using something *with* someone or giving it up entirely is difficult. They think that if they give up something that it will either be changed in some way or it won't come back. To a young child a day or a week can feel pretty much the same. If we want kids to become sharing adults we should not force them to share while they are so young. When playmates are coming, allow the child to put away toys that they may truly be worried about. Better yet, purchase some interesting toys, new or used. Place them in a tub. When the children arrive place the tub in the middle of the floor and say, "These are my toys and you can use them." The toys are interesting and special to everyone and you are modeling kindness and sharing.

Remember, young children are not good 'reader's' of body language or other social cues. They are still learning how to play near and with others, how to enter play with other children and how to sustain play over periods of time. These are incredible skills that take lots of time and practice to develop. I call this SHARED UNDERSTANDING: a level of understand where all parties are agreeable and/or with the same goals and ability to postpone one's own needs for that of the group. Young children have very limited life experiences to draw upon. It is important for us to be patient, do not take sides, and help children develop 'shared understanding' over time.

We want the next generation of children to be kind and generous. Of this I have no doubt, and innately children are generous. But as adults it is our responsibility to be their fences and safety nets. When they see generosity abound in their homes and the community they are seeing what that means. When we engage them in meaningful experiences; helping a neighbor fix a flat tire, baking cookies for the new family that just moved in, we are providing them much richer experiences that they understand and can emulate in the future.