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# Be nice, you've got to share

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## How embarrassing

Have you ever taken your baby to baby-group and your baby has been very active, taking toys from the other children? All you want to do leave hurriedly, or give them a crash course in sharing. If you and the other adults present don't understand that learning to share can take between two to three years it can be really embarrassing.

## Me and mine

When a baby is born she does not know that she is separate from Mum. It will take her the whole first year to work out that she is a separate person. Only then is she ready to learn that she is a *me*, and an *I*. Once she gets that idea firmly under her belt, she is in a position to start exploring *mine*. A baby who hasn't worked out *me* and *mine* certainly can't manage the concept of sharing. Sharing requires that she advances from *me* and *mine* to become aware of *you* and *yours*. Only when she is aware of *me*, *mine*, *you* and *yours* can she see that *you* might like hers. The bad news is that this is probably going to take at least two years.



## Bullies and victims

In the meantime how do you manage the baby group gatherings in a way that doesn't set children up in the roles of bullies and victims? When an infant takes a toy from another it is not done with malice. Picking up a toy that looks interesting to you from the floor, or taking it from a hand, what's the difference if you haven't worked out *yours* and *mine*?

## Dealing with upset

Well, for starters the carpet doesn't get upset that you have taken the toy, so lets deal with the child who has lost the toy first. Observe the child and if he is not upset there is no reason for you to be upset either. If *you* are upset, then listen to the stories you are telling yourself about the child. You can be almost one hundred percent sure what is happening between the children does not match your story. The child is exploring her world, she is not being mean.

## Words to shame or soothe?

If the *child* is upset, you need to acknowledge his feelings because he will be awash with emotion, and you can help him make sense of that. In a calm and centred way comment on what has happened, without any judgement. So you won't say -

*"Oh you poor thing, Catherine was very naughty taking that from you wasn't she?"*

but calmly comment

*"I can see you are upset. Really upset."*

That way Catherine is not cast into the role of the naughty bully, and just as important, the other child doesn't get scripted into the role of victim. These roles can stick if you aren't careful and you wouldn't want that. It is a terrible start for a child when the adults give them destructive self-images which they will internalise subconsciously.

## So what about Catherine?

If you get there as the tug of war is going on, while you ensure no-one is hurt, you can turn the problem over to them. What you won't do is sort it for them. If you take the ball from Catherine to give it back to Martin because "*he had it first*" you have just 'done a Catherine' yourself. How will they make sense of this when it doesn't make sense? However, if you calmly get in there alongside the toddlers, turn your hands palms up and offer,

*"I see you both want the same thing.*

*What can we do?"*

toddlers will stop, look at you and most often sort it out themselves. If, after a wait period, that doesn't do it, you could offer a similar toy:

*"Here is another ball. Would you like this one?"*

You can also support the child who gives up too easily by giving permission for him to hold on if he wants to keep a toy,

*"Hold on if you want to keep the ball Martin."*

Assertiveness is a virtue too.

## Keeping them safe

There is a real balancing act for adults when children are growing and discovering together. Our first consideration is to keep babies and children safe from hurting each other. That is done firmly and kindly without blame, shame, or name-calling. When we have made sure each child is safe, our role is to support them in their present situation, and the kind of support they want from us is not what we have done traditionally.

## Toddlers learn by doing

When conflict arises between children it offers the perfect learning-time for both children: it is the perfect situation for them to learn to solve problems peacefully. But - and it is a big but - whether they do or not will depend on you. Many adults and teachers get in there *not* to support the children, but to solve the conflict for them. That is such a waste of a fine learning situation, with two very big downsides:

1. If adults always solve their conflicts and problems for them, they will always look to adults to solve

their conflicts and problems for them.

2. Worse, by fixing things for them (because we feel uncomfortable with conflict) we are robbing them of learning one of the most important skills they need if they are going to live happy lives - how to sort out their own stuff.

## You are the model they will mirror

When you offer respectful support to toddlers and young children in conflict you will be surprised how quickly they become skilful in finding solutions for their own issues.

## Gently does it

Children will be as gentle with each other as they have been treated themselves, yet still children pull hair, mouth (bite), and hurt others. Firstly, this *must* be stopped straight away, firmly and gently, but it is important for adults to realise that this hurting is *not* done with malice. This is the infant learning about this amazing world they have landed in. There is a lot to learn and it takes an infant a long, long time to learn that getting handfuls of that interesting stuff called hair hurts and causes another child to cry. We can help that process of them working out cause and effect by gently telling them:

*"When you pull hair it hurts Jason."*

It is enough to put your hand between the child wanting to explore hair and the hair while saying.

*"I can't let you pull Jason's hair. It hurts him."*

## Be nice, you've got to be patient

Children will share as *soon* as they have the all the learnings in place that make sharing possible. If you understand what they have to learn and support them as they are doing it they will get there with elegance. Children supported in this way astound adults with their mature and peaceful play.

Pennie Brownlee 2005

