



Understanding Sharing: A Developmental & Connection-Based Perspective

“It’s Mine!” - Why This Is Normal

When young children say “*mine*” or hold tightly to a toy, this is not selfish behaviour. It is a healthy developmental stage.

In the toddler and early preschool years, children are:

- still forming a sense of self
- learning where *they* end and others begin
- developing emotional regulation and impulse control
- unable to consistently take another person’s perspective

At this stage, toys often feel like an extension of the child’s body and identity.

Being asked to give one up can feel confusing, threatening, or overwhelming — not social.

👉 Expecting a young child to share before they are developmentally ready is unrealistic.

Why “Forced Sharing” Can Backfire

When children are pressured to share - or when adults say things like:

- “That makes me sad”
- “Good sharing makes me happy”
- “You have to give it to them”

...children may learn:

- that adult approval matters more than their own feelings
- that boundaries aren’t respected
- that relationships feel unpredictable or unsafe

Rather than learning generosity, children may:

- clamp down harder on toys
- become dysregulated
- disengage or shut down
- associate social interaction with stress

Sharing learned through pressure is compliance, not connection.



Sharing Is Not One Simple Skill

True sharing requires many developmental capacities, including:

- emotional regulation
- perspective-taking
- flexible thinking
- planning and problem-solving (praxis)
- feeling safe with another person

These abilities develop over time, not through instruction alone.

At age two or three, children may only be able to experience one emotion at a time. They are often still fully inside *their* experience and cannot yet hold someone else's needs alongside their own.

What Children Are Often Really Communicating

When a child doesn't want to share, they may be thinking:

- "I'm not finished yet"
- "I don't know what to do next"
- "This is grounding me"
- "I need more time"
- "I feel overwhelmed"

Holding onto a toy can be a way to:

- regulate their body
- maintain a sense of control
- feel safe in the moment

Taking the object away without support can leave the child without a plan, increasing distress.

A More Helpful Goal: Sharing Connection, Not Objects

Instead of focusing on *sharing the toy*, we can focus on sharing the moment.

Children can learn to:

- share attention
- share space
- share joy
- share experiences
- stay connected while holding boundaries

Helpful language includes:



- “You’re not ready yet.”
- “You’re still playing with that.”
- “You can have a turn when you’re finished.”
- “Do you want to show them how it works?”
- “Let’s play together.”

Children are allowed to say:

- “No”
- “Not yet”
- “I need more time”

These are healthy boundary skills, not rudeness.

Supporting Sharing at Home (Especially With Siblings)

Some children struggle more with sharing when:

- they don’t know what to do next
- play requires lots of imagination or planning
- their body is already dysregulated

What helps:

- choosing sensory or tactile play with multiple materials (e.g. water play, playdough, sand, balls)
- reducing competition over single “high-value” toys
- offering structure and predictability
- staying physically and emotionally close during conflict
- helping children wait *with* someone, not alone

Rather than separating children, the goal is to bring them closer together in shared, safe experiences.

The Adult’s Role

Adults are the anchor.

Our role is to:

- slow things down
- validate feelings
- support regulation
- help children find a plan
- model calm problem-solving

When children feel safe, seen, and supported, generosity grows naturally.



The Big Picture

Sharing is not a moral skill.

It is a developmental, relational, and nervous-system-based skill. Children don't learn to share by being forced.

They learn by experiencing:

- connection
- safety
- respect
- repeated positive interactions over time

When children feel secure in what is *theirs*, they become far more open to sharing, when they're ready.

