



How To Handle **TURN-TAKING**

WHAT IS TURN-TAKING

Turn-taking is the ability to wait for, give up, and understand the back-and-forth flow of an object, action, or conversation. In early childhood, this can look like:

- Waiting for a toy another child is using
- Alternating roles in pretend play
- Exchanging babbles or words in early conversations
- Taking turns pouring water or placing puzzle pieces

It's a foundational skill for social-emotional development, executive functioning, language acquisition, and cooperative play. But like all complex skills, it evolves slowly—and isn't instinctive.



Why “Sharing” Is a Misguided Expectation

Adults often confuse turn-taking with sharing. While they may seem similar, they require very different brain functions.

Sharing implies giving something up willingly for the sake of another, often without knowing when (or if) you'll get it back.

That's a cognitively and emotionally advanced act of empathy, impulse control, and delayed gratification—capacities that are still immature in children under 6, especially under 3.



Brain Science Behind Why Sharing Is Hard

Children's brains are still developing key areas related to social and self-regulatory behavior:

- **Prefrontal Cortex (PFC):** Responsible for impulse control, decision-making, and empathy. It's underdeveloped in early childhood and not fully mature until the mid-20s.
- **Amygdala:** The emotional processing center of the brain, often dominates in toddlers and preschoolers, meaning emotional reactions like "Mine!" or "No!" are instinctive.
- **Corpus Callosum:** Still developing, making it harder to process and balance emotional responses with rational thinking.

Thus, when we expect a toddler to "share," we're often asking them to override their basic survival instincts and emotional brain—something they aren't yet wired to do.

Why Children May Struggle with Sharing or Turn-Taking:



- **Focused on the Material**
- **Can Feel Unsettling**

- **Offers a Sense of Control**
- **Sharing Can Be Unrealistic**



Focused on the Material

When a child is playing with something, it should be viewed as serious work. While it may not always seem like a big deal for adults, a child's engagement with materials is important and meaningful.

In these moments, they are focused, curious, and engaged. To abruptly halt this because we think their time should be up, is unfair to their feelings and experience.



Can Feel Unsettling

For young children, it can feel very uncomfortable seeing another child take and use something that belongs to them.

Children often have a strong sense of ownership and security over their possessions, in which it is not always understood if and when they'll get their possessions back.



Offers a Sense of Control

Oftentimes, children may not want to share an item of theirs because it's simply empowering to be able to say "no."

When we think about it, young children rarely have enough autonomy over their day-to-day experiences, as they typically have to follow an adult's lead. If a child says "no" to sharing, try to let it be. As children get older, they tend to let this go.




Sharing Can Be Unrealistic

Imagine if another adult approached you and asked to have a turn wearing your bracelet, play games on your cell phone, or go through your closet and try on your clothes?

Most adults would find this uncomfortable and practically rude. If we are uncomfortable with this concept as adults, then we shouldn't expect this to be practiced by our children.

How Turn-Taking Develops

Turn-taking is a learned social skill supported by experience, adult guidance, and repetition. It follows a developmental progression:

1. **Parallel Play (1–2 years):** Children play near each other, but not with each other. Turn-taking doesn't yet occur.
 2. **Associative Play (2.5–3.5 years):** Children start noticing others' play and may attempt to engage. Basic turn-taking begins with adult support.
 3. **Cooperative Play (4–6 years):** Children begin to understand rules, roles, and negotiation. Turn-taking becomes more fluid and self-directed.
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Why Forced Sharing Can Be Harmful

Forcing a child to give up a toy before they're ready doesn't teach generosity—it teaches compliance. While well-meaning, this approach can have unintended consequences:

- **It disrupts focus and autonomy.** When a child is made to hand something over, they lose the chance to finish their work or play, which undermines their sense of control and engagement.
- **It breeds resentment, not empathy.** The child giving up the toy may feel angry or powerless, while the one receiving it learns that complaining leads to reward—not patience or collaboration.
- **It undermines true turn-taking.** Children learn best when they wait for something and receive it when a peer is truly ready. That's how generosity and fairness are built from within.
- **It can create power struggles.** Children may begin hoarding or guarding toys if they feel their time with materials isn't respected.

Instead of forcing sharing, allow children to finish, support those waiting through frustration, and model respectful language. This approach nurtures real cooperation, empathy, and self-regulation.

Adult Role in Supporting Turn-Taking

Adults are co-regulators in early childhood. Children do not build turn-taking skills in isolation—they need consistent, calm modeling, protection of autonomy, & patience. Here's how adults can support true turn-taking:

- **Let the child finish.** It's not up to the adult—or another child—to decide when someone is “done” with a toy or activity. Children deserve the right to complete their engagement without being rushed, pressured, or told their time is up.
- **Avoid timers and rigid turn systems.** While well-intended, these tools create an artificial sense of fairness. Learning to wait isn't about minutes—it's about respecting others' rhythms and building real frustration tolerance.
- **Support the waiting child without rescuing.** It's okay for children to feel upset or frustrated while waiting. These moments build emotional resilience, problem-solving, and self-regulation—not by removing the discomfort, but by staying close and calm as they experience it.





- **Model respectful language and empathy.** Say things like, “You really want that toy. I know it’s hard to wait. When he’s finished, you’ll get a turn.” This validates emotions while reinforcing expectations.
- **Don’t shame or rush the child with the toy.** They are immersed in play and learning. Rushing them teaches that their time and focus don’t matter.
- **Coach without controlling.** Narrate what’s happening, guide without commanding, and trust the process. Children can and do learn these skills when given space and time.

By removing imposed timelines and centering mutual respect, turn-taking becomes a practice of collaboration rather than compliance—laying the foundation for authentic, empathetic relationships later in life.



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