

Rethinking Sharing

by Cassandra Tondreau

In my bathroom cabinet, I have a bottle of lotion that costs \$100. Take from this statement what you will. Perhaps I have outrageous taste in cosmetics. Perhaps I am a sucker for gimmicks. Both are true, along with the fact that this lotion is mine. All mine. Bought with my own cash, thoroughly loved, rarely used and meticulously stored. This is an object I do not share. My husband is acutely aware of the value of this lotion to me and avoids it at all costs. The same could be said for the reverence I show for his prized race medals. We can look at them, but both of us know we need to ask before we take them out.

As an early childhood educator, I am accustomed to the refrain, "Share with your friends." We tell children constantly to share, but what it means to actually share is quite a murky subject. Food and family-style dining are obvious topics around which sharing is discussed. We dish something out equally, or according to our needs.



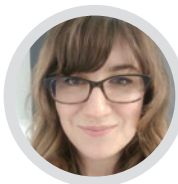
Photo by Scott Bilstad

When someone comes to our house as an invited guest, we offer drinks, seats, food: comforts to acclimate them and endear them to us. Things become a bit murkier when it comes to our stuff. We would all like to be sharers, but how much do we really share of our objects and possessions? We might often feel that we need to justify instances in which we do not want to share, or even allow contact with precious items. Regarding children, we often hear sharing referred to as a character attribute, e.g.: "He is so good at sharing." Has sharing become synonymous with being accommodating, friendly and giving?

While I was watching two children interact one day, a conflict erupted over a particular toy car. One child would not hand over a car to another child when asked to do so, causing them to turn to me and say, "Cassie, she's not sharing!" Confused, I asked the child, "Does sharing mean she hands the car to you?" I was presented with a spectacular eye roll and an emphatic, "Yeah!"

As I saw it, I was confronted by two issues. The first was a problem of object in play. Children are naturally attracted to objects in use. This makes sense: seeing the toy in action gives them ideas for their turn with it. They become inspired and naturally want the toy to be handed over so they can get started. Because I could not break the car in two, nor magically generate a new one, we reached an impasse. As I thought of how to respond, I came upon the second issue in the sharing dilemma: the issue of empathy. Could the child build an understanding of what someone else's turn with the toy could feel like? Could this help the child enjoy watching a child playing as much as they enjoyed playing with said toy themselves? How could we foster an empathetic response to play and sharing?

Opting not to share something immediately is often viewed as a sign of selfishness. How strange, considering how we all know how we felt playing with our favorite objects as a child. A doll, a car, and even a stick could hold deep meaning and present hours of joyful exploration for us. We diminish the value of the toy every time we tell a child to hand something over. Even worse, if we have not observed the interaction preceding the sharing dispute, how are we to know the value of the objects in play? Sometimes a toy can be obvious, but when a child demands one of two sticks, part of a stack of rocks or



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a flower from a pile of dandelions, it can be confusing to see a child become distraught over something we view as being replaceable. How are we to know that to the child this could mean losing one of two perfectly sized drumsticks, one of a pile of diamonds and magic stones, or one of 10 flowers picked for a parent just returning from a work trip. If we consider play to be a child's work, it becomes nearly ridiculous when we think about simply taking something away from them. Would we do this with our laptop, phone or any other tool we use to do our jobs? When we have to share these tools, we undoubtedly start with a phrase like, "Hey, would you mind if I used that? Would you let me know when you are done?" Why should we expect anything different from children? What if we cannot or will not share something? Does it say something bad about us, or in some way imply a stain on our character? Does this make us selfish, or does it give us an opportunity to display that which is most valuable to us?

At my center in Seattle, Washington, we have begun rethinking sharing by building a culture that acknowledges a child's need for several things: a great deal of time to play, access to materials and support in communicating needs to both fellow children as well as teachers. When the inevitable cries of "I want it! Give it to me!" arise, we often encourage the children to make agreements for when they can have a go. Suggestions we often cue the children with are, "Can I use that when you are done?" or "How long are you going to play with that?" This is supplemented by supporting use of toys for extended periods as well, if a child seeks that. I do not see any reason for a child to hand over a toy simply because another child requests it. My goals lie in communication and creating pathways for the children to dialogue about their needs.

Our hope is to build a way to manage toys and turns while creating a space

for self-advocacy and fairness. To a 3- or 4-year-old, this really feels like work, and it is worthwhile and important, as frustrating as it may be to a nearby adult. When we cut short the process of working through the management of sharing, our behavior tells the child, "I do not care about how much you care about this object, I just want this conflict to end." Is that the sentiment we want to convey? Do we want to educate a generation of children to hand things over at the slightest suggestion? Or, do we want to create a dynamic in which a child can constructively and kindly use an object just as long as they need to?

This idea begs the question: what could inspire us to share our most valuable items? My favorite starting point is discovering the story behind the important object. Building a relationship with a child and showing we care about their interests allow us the opportunity to build background on the things they choose. When we understand why they choose something again and again, we discover their priorities and passions. Going through the process of building relationship, communicating openly and managing conflict in a fair and honest way create a dynamic in which children really do want to share, not only objects but ideas, interests and loves. When we feel that someone is taking an interest in us, as opposed to the object between us, the opportunity for sharing is naturally bridged.

As for my pricey lotion and my husband's medals? When a friend shows interest, and has built a history of being a trustworthy, you can bet those things come flying out of the cabinet to be appreciated. As silly as they may be, these objects are prized, expensive, or otherwise valuable, and they mean something to us. When that is recognized by others that also value those things, the joy with which we offer them up is palpable. You might say that the best sharing feels less like sharing objects and more like sharing yourself.