

Preschool Years: Why Won't They Share?



I think we've all experienced it as parents at one time or another. We come to pick up our little angel from the daycare or school and are delighted to see our child playing with the other little darlings. Seeing that our angel is occupied with a few toys, we take a moment to chat with the daycare provider or teacher about the angel and the craziness of our past 3 to 6 hours. Then, the unthinkable shatters our pristine picture of discourse.

The sound of clinking toys. A whine. A smack. High pitched shrieks. Outright crying.

Ah, yes. The sounds of sharing-gone-wrong become familiar to us once again.

We do the best we can. We tell our child a firm no or be nice and if necessary we scoop him up away from the other children and try desperately to distract him with something-anything! Of course, even if we manage to calm our angel down (by now our child's halo seems decidedly crooked, no matter how many dimples are in his cheeks), we can't help but feel a more than subtle exhaustion.

In the preschool years, kids show a remarkably sharp increase in how much they act out. Understandably, this is both disconcerting and frustrating to parents, but it becomes less so if a parent understands how their little one is developing mentally. What's really happening is just that the child is finally learning that they are a separate being with distinct influences on people and objects. Once they've learned they have this influence and autonomy, they are reluctant to relinquish it. They become more willing to defend what they perceive as theirs because they do not necessarily recognize that other children have the same influence and autonomy that they have. In other words, kids act out because they simply are not mentally developed enough to understand that the self has a social role as well as an individual one.

In terms of parenting, the young child's concept of self means that a parent needs to be careful that the child learns the correct social actions rather than mere punishment. If a parent responds to their child's inappropriate behavior with only yelling or physical reprimands, then the child learns that they will receive yelling or physical reprimands if their behavior is repeated. This may deter delinquent behavior to a degree, but it does nothing to teach the child what the appropriate action really is. The child still will have no frame of reference for what to do in place of their inappropriate behavior.

All people, even children, are social creatures, and social behavior is very much a learned thing. Parents need to be firm with their children when the children have behaved inappropriately, but because children learn primarily by observation in their first few years, parents also need to make sure that their young child has opportunities to see good social behavior modeled. If modeling is provided, a young child has something to counter an egocentric view. It won't make every tantrum stop, but it may help.