

Growing Up in Stages

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF THREE- AND FOUR-YEAR-OLDS



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DEDICATION

For Adam, my serious, yet ever-so-smart and curious grandson, who allowed me to share many of these wonderfully insightful illustrations about his childhood.



PRAISE FOR SUSAN A. MILLER'S BOOKS IN THE GROWING UP IN STAGES SERIES

SHARON MACDONALD,
author and educator

Susan has been a personal friend and a resource for me since my classroom days teaching four-year-olds in San Antonio, Texas, and on through my years on the road speaking to teachers about the ages and stages of early childhood development. I always sought out her opinions and insights. Now I do not have to call her. I have her books!

Her understanding of social, cognitive, and emotional development in young children is unrivaled. She explains ages and stages in her unique way—clean, simple, honest. She is a gifted writer with real empathy and understanding for her subjects—children.

Susan Miller's books belong in the personal library of any early childhood teacher. Buy them.

DEBBIE VERA
PhD, associate professor and chair of the Department of Educator and Leadership Preparation, Texas A&M University

While reading the scenarios, I could easily see how all three domains in this series—emotional, social, and cognitive development—are interdependent. This series provides a holistic view of the child and really helps the reader to understand the overlap of development into each domain.

The writing style is personal and engaging for teachers.

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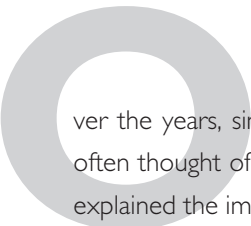
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INTRODUCTION



Over the years, since I was a child-development student at Syracuse University, I have so often thought of the sound advice given by a very wise professor, Elizabeth Manwell. She explained the importance of observing young children in their daily surroundings. Through observation, you can become aware of children's social interactions with each other. By observing carefully, you tune into how young children use materials and solve problems. By assessing a series of written observations, a teacher can see patterns of development: Is a child struggling? Taking a leadership role? Dependent on adults?

As college students, we discussed our observations out in the field. Soon we discovered pertinent connections between understanding various stages of child development and planning relevant curriculum and appropriate teaching strategies, as well as monitoring a child's progress. The importance of observation and applying an understanding of the stages of child development principles as the basis for appropriate teaching practices has been my guide for forty years.

In another situation, Dr. Manwell used a line from Rogers and Hammerstein's musical *South Pacific* as a topic for a parent workshop: "You've got to be carefully taught . . . to hate all the people your relatives hate." This powerful social message from the 1960s still rings true today. I have never forgotten the dynamic discussions that took place in a racially troubled community during that evening workshop, which included African American and white families, preschool teachers, and Dr. Manwell. The response from the audience was clear—we must begin with our young children. They need to learn to live and play together in socially positive ways. It is up to the adults in their lives (parents and teachers) to support

them so this will happen. We need to remember to practice this concept every day in our work with children.

WHAT YOU WILL NOTICE

By their nature, preschoolers are social beings. They find it easy to make friends spontaneously. Typically, three-year-olds have various friends for different activities. Interested in playing with their peers, they shift from parallel play to developing ways to interact with their friends. Becoming more socially competent, four-year-olds find it fun to enter into collaborative activities with several friends as they discuss and acknowledge each other's ideas. Many four-year-olds enter into best-friend relationships and enjoy telling secret silly jokes, wearing matching outfits, and sharing special rituals.

Playing together involves sharing, but that is certainly a difficult concept for egocentric three-year-olds to understand. It is confusing for them to comprehend why they don't necessarily have to share a personal possession, but they need to share a school toy, even when they had it first! However, when three-year-olds do not have a vested interest in materials, they discover it can be fun to share and play cooperatively. Less egocentric, four-year-olds are delighted to enter into self-initiated cooperative efforts where they find it is exciting to share all kinds of things, such as their ideas, friends' company, art materials, and their feelings.

Preschoolers are happiest when they have plenty of time for involvement in unstructured play. Although three-year-olds find great pleasure in connecting with their favorite adults, four-year-olds are ever so happy expanding their social relationships by interacting with their friends, especially their best friends.

While preschoolers are interacting with classmates and playing with friends, they often begin experimenting with teasing. Teasing is a form of play that can be fun when both parties are enjoying themselves. However, three-year-olds are frequently not successful in their teasing because they are not sophisticated enough to know what makes something funny or to understand how the other person feels. Sometimes, four-year-olds think teasing with bathroom words and shocking others is funny. However, when they try to gain attention by teasing, the result can be annoyance. Not all teasing is verbal, such as when preschoolers poke each other, play tickling games, or chase one another.

During rough-and-tumble play, three- and four-year-olds seem to instinctively tune into their own movements and those of others, as they learn to read body language. Rough-and-tumble play provides opportunities for preschoolers to try out leader and follower

roles as they learn to develop a sense of fairness. Socially, they become aware of what their playmates like or do not like and learn to adjust their play accordingly.

By three, as soon as preschool children are comfortably able to label themselves as a boy or a girl, they demonstrate a preference for gender-typed play activities. Most four-year-olds prefer playing with friends of the same sex—just check out all of the boys in the block area! Preschoolers focus on gender cues they have received from those around them as well as from media and technology, and stereotypical mixed messages frequently encourage them to react with negative behaviors, such as excluding the opposite sex from activities.

Somewhere between the ages of three and five, preschoolers become aware of racial categories, although they do not always classify themselves accurately. Around age four-and-a-half, many preschoolers decenter and become less egocentric, which enables them to piece together their own identities and explore how they are similar to or diverse from others. Celebrating family, national, and religious holidays is a wonderful way for three- and four-year-olds to learn in natural ways from their peers and teachers about their diverse cultures.

As they develop an ear for different sounds, three-year-olds find it fun to listen to and repeat nursery rhymes, songs, and finger plays. Besides listening to each other's preposterously silly banter throughout the day, four-year-olds love to listen to funny jokes and riddles—even if they don't understand them! Dialogues may become rather lengthy as they begin to understand the importance of using their receptive powers to obtain information.

An important step toward learning to interact with others occurs when preschoolers use their expressive verbal language skills to share their ideas, needs, and feelings. Through books, three- and four-year-olds are introduced to a vast technical vocabulary, which helps them understand words in context and associate an activity with a group of words. Three-year-olds enjoy retelling stories and can recall key events in order. Adding props to preschoolers' dramatic play can help enhance and build their communication skills.

During imaginative play, three-year-olds are not quite sure whether things are make-believe or real. However, even though four-year-old play can be filled with fantasy, they have a good sense of what is fantasy or reality. Three-year-olds' imitative imaginative play themes are built around experiences with friends and family life; later in development, four-year-olds expand their pretend ideas to include the community. Frequently, four-year-olds are motivated in their imaginative play by wild superheroes or villains. However, if they are encouraged to develop their own imaginative dialogues and make good choices, they may turn out to be powerful rescuers and save the world!

By understanding more about these areas of social development and exploring the related strategies suggested in this book, you can encourage appropriate interactions and celebrate the growth of preschoolers in your care.

As You Read This Book

As you start each chapter, you will find a definition for the chapter's theme. As you read on, you may wish to think about and add your own definition on a sticky note.

Next are some highlights of developmental milestones of three- and four-year-olds. These will help you understand the stage of social development that a preschooler is functioning in during a specific time.

Then I will share some scenarios related to the chapter topic. These snapshot views are taken from events that happened with the children in my various classrooms (names changed, of course), from observations that I have been fortunate enough to make in preschool programs around the United States and abroad, and from special memories of my grandsons at particular three- and four-year-old stages. Related to the different scenarios are explanations of the stages to help you understand why a behavior or action is or is not occurring at that specific time. As we are all aware, individual preschool children may develop at different rates—some a little slowly, and others more rapidly.

Although I would like very much to have a face-to-face conversation with each reader, that of course is not possible. So what I have tried to do, as the author and a teacher, is to write in a conversational tone discussing the stages that young children go through. Rather than burdening you with heavy research and theoretical references, I have attempted to keep the flow of observation and application light and practical.

Next you will discover guidance specifically for you, the teacher or caregiver. The section called What You Can Do is designed to serve as a springboard by providing exciting curriculum activities or helpful teaching strategies for you to try with the children in your care. Feel free to build on these ideas and write on sticky notes to make this section your own.

The Other Aspects to Consider—Alerts section deals with circumstances that you might have questions about, such as when children are not quite in step with the social-development milestones for their age. This may indicate that you or a child's parents should consider seeking professional assistance for answers.

The ideas in the Activities for Parents to Try at Home portion are fun, easy-to-accomplish adventures appropriate for parents to explore with their children. You may wish to share these ideas with parents during conferences, online, in your newsletter, or

by posting on a bulletin board. If you like, ask parents to share their own ideas on the topic and to provide photos of the activities for everyone to enjoy afterward.

Finally, a special section suggests fascinating books to read with children. All of the literature is related to the chapter topic and just begs you and the children to look at the enticing pictures, talk about the words, and enter into a dialogue about what is happening on the pages. Research shows that reading to young children is the most important way to stimulate their desire to become readers.

As you read this book, I hope you enjoy your adventures observing young children and learning how various social-development milestones affect the different stages of the lives of three- and four-year-olds.

1

FORMING FRIENDSHIPS

Friendship—a mutual-affection relationship among individuals who may have similar interests

Let's take a glimpse into what you might observe as three- and four-year-olds grow socially. Although not all children develop at the same rate or achieve specific milestones at the same time, you can probably expect to see some of the following behaviors as friendships evolve among the preschoolers in your care:

- Three-year-olds make friends spontaneously.
- Three-year-olds often select friends because of their proximity.
- Three-year-olds have become interested in playing with their peers.
- Four-year-olds discuss and acknowledge each other's ideas.
- Four-year-olds may become frustrated if one friend always dominates the play.
- Four-year-olds show a preference for same-sex best friends.

Now, let's look at some scenarios of how children in your classroom might be interacting with playmates and developing friendships.

At school, three-year-old Tom enjoys building towers using Lego bricks with his friend Paul. When Tom goes outside, he likes to fill up the red wagon with leaves with his buddy

Jeb. Then, when Tom and his mom walk home from school together, they stop in the park, where he has great fun creating a huge mound of sand with his park friend, Michael.

Friendships for three-year-olds are often spontaneous and fluid. The child's playmate at that moment is most likely to be called his friend. He has various friends for different activities. Not needing any introductions, three-year-olds easily move in and out of play with new friends when their interests change. This type of play offers three-year-olds a chance to hone their social skills and develop their language abilities as they converse with their friends. They are sharpening their problem-solving skills while learning how to form and dissolve their attachments to others.

Because their friends are apt to change when their activities and interests change, three-year-olds, like Tom, might refer to a specific friend as a "park friend" or a "Lego buddy." Often, they select friends because they are nearby at the time, playing with an interesting toy, or participating in a fun activity.

A three-year-old may actually be more interested in the toy than the other child. Sometimes, an exciting skill, such as building a high pile of leaves, might be the attraction. At other times, a three-year-old might admire a



friend's particular physical attribute, such as having a lovely long ponytail, or an exceptional strength, such as being able to carry a stack of three big, hollow wooden blocks at one time.

Although young three-year-olds still enjoy their parents' or teacher's attention while playing, they are quite interested in playing with their peers too. Socially, they are shifting from sitting right next to their friend in parallel play to learning how to interact with others. For example, as Tom's Lego friend, Paul, stacks one block on top of the next, Tom imitates this action. This imitative form of play lets Paul know, "I really like your actions and I think you are a cool friend!" This interaction might encourage the two children to have a conversation or play together with their manipulative materials.

Still rather egocentric, three-year-olds may have ideas about friendship that are quite self-centered. For example, it is difficult for three-year-olds to share. If a competition arises between two friends for a particular object that both children desire, this may weaken the

new friendship and cause one child to move on and look for a more interesting playmate or activity. Or one play friend might grab the desirable item and claim it for himself, which could also hamper the friendship.

With better communication skills and their emerging social competence, four-year-olds are more apt to see a situation from another child's perspective. They are more cooperative and find it exciting and fun to participate in collaborative activities. For this reason, they love small-group projects. For example, when several boys discover some empty cardboard boxes, they enthusiastically put their heads together in shared planning. The four-year-olds discuss and acknowledge each other's ideas. Then they decide on Anselm's suggestion to make a rocket ship. Because four-year-olds enjoy having a friend's approval, Doug says to Anselm, "I'll get tape to stick boxes together. OK?"



Although four-year-olds can have several close friends, sometimes the addition of an extra child to a project makes it uncomfortable for the original little group of friends. Fortunately,

older four-year-olds are learning how to use their negotiation skills. For instance, Teddy offers to trade a special can of booster rocket fuel if Anselm and Doug will let him ride on their rocket. As part of the social learning process, four-year-olds try to be more respectful of their friends' feelings. They will usually ask to try out an activity or to use something instead of grabbing it away from a friend.

For play to continue and friendships to be maintained, actions need to be satisfying for all of the children. For instance, when Becky, Elise, and Rosa play beauty spa, Becky always wants to be the "massager" and the beautician. She tells the other girls, "You are my clients." A problem can arise when one friend, like Becky, always needs to dominate the play activity. In this case, Elise and Rosa become frustrated because they do not want to follow Becky's orders all of the time. Feeling stressed, Rosa threatens Becky: "You can't come to my birthday party if I can't polish nails." Rosa leaves with hurt feelings.

While establishing their social identities, four-year-olds begin to show a preference for same-sex friendships. This does not mean, however, that if Anna and Nick ride to school

together in a carpool, they cannot be best friends. In fact, they might even develop a little crush on each other.

This is an exciting time in the preschoolers' social development. They enter into intense, intimate relationships with a best friend. Some of these preschool attachments last for many years. My best nursery school pal, Elizabeth Marcy, and I remained friends well into adulthood, and I was the maid of honor at her wedding!

Best friends may appear inseparable. They like to sit next to each other and whisper secrets back and forth. They giggle while they walk with their arms around each other. Best friends enjoy laughing at each other's silly jokes. In mutual admiration, two soccer buddies, Paula and Tracy, each wear their hair in duplicate ponytails tied back with purple ribbons. Best friends Deepak and Arnold like to dress alike in their matching Spurs shirts and wristbands. Rituals are also part of these ongoing best-friend relationships. Upon arrival at school, Alec and Kenny high-five each other twice. Then, they laugh as they greet each other with "Hello, Jell-O!" and head off together for the block corner, their favorite play area.

At this age, best-friend relationships easily cross racial and cultural lines. Special friendships also may be formed with adults. Jon became very attached to our center's foster grandmother, Mrs. Metzger. Daily, the two of them made pretend sundaes for their "ice cream social." This important intergenerational friendship helped Jon learn how to relate to others.

It takes two committed friends to support a best-friend relationship. When problems arise, they may need to use their problem-solving skills or try compromising. Mary Ann explains to Debbie carefully, "For our Cinderella party, if you give me the diamond tiara to wear this time, I'll give you the beautiful fur cape."

As marvelous as it is to have a best friend, it can be devastating if a seemingly insurmountable problem arises. When Erica arrives at circle time, she finds Angie sitting in her special place next to Kimberly. And they are laughing and hugging each other! It is difficult for Erica to perceive that her very best friend, Kimberly, could like someone else as much as her. Jealous and feeling excluded by the presence of this third child, she yells back to Kimberly, "You are not my best friend anymore!" Usually, best friends manage to make up. However, mending hurt feelings can be hard, and the children may decide to just move on. Even though these situations may be unpleasant, it is part of the larger process of making friends and learning different ways to manage relationships.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Show how to approach a friend.** Often, young children do not know how to initiate a friendship. Model suggestions and give them verbal hints. Show them how to give a friendly smile or inviting wave. They can say hello and use the friend's name: "Hello, Roberto!" They might add, "Come play with me." Help them consider bringing along an item to add interest when trying to join in the play.
- **Model positive friendship behaviors.** Work out unpleasant interpersonal situations using puppets. Show how a friendly puppet might respond to an unlikeable puppet who teases or tries to take away a toy. The friendly puppet could explain, "I'm playing with the robot now. But you can have it next."
- **Engineer the environment.** Bring friends together by designing collaborative interest centers. Encourage pair play by adding two phones or two fascinating hats in the dramatic play center. Side-by-side chairs at the computer center will stimulate game playing.
- **Create friendship posters.** Take pictures of friends interacting together. Then blow them up to decorate your classroom walls. Ask the children to provide friendship captions by dictating a phrase for you to write down about what they are doing together.
- **Nominate a friend.** During circle time, invite children to state a characteristic of a good friend (such as kind or fun). Write the suggestions on chart paper. Then encourage children to put a friend's name on a strip of paper next to the trait. This can be an ongoing activity.



OTHER ASPECTS TO CONSIDER—ALERTS

- **Help children cope with feelings of loss.** Young children often feel sad when a friend moves away, switches schools, or is assigned to another class. If a child becomes severely depressed, you and the parents may need to find ways for the friends to stay in touch and maintain their

friendship (such as sending photo postcards or meeting for a picnic). If the depression continues to lead to an unhealthy emotional state, the parents might need to seek assistance from a therapist.

- **Watch for excessive competition or bullying.** Difficulties with the relationship can occur when one friend takes a leadership role and expects that his buddy will always want to follow along with his ideas. This may cause a falling out between the two friends. It is important to be aware of any bullying tactics being used by the more dominant friend.
- **Monitor overlooked or excluded children's feelings.** Sometimes children can be unkind by socially rejecting a specific child. Her feelings can be hurt when she is ignored or always selected last to play. She may need assistance socially with attempts at making friends and joining play activities.

ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS TO TRY AT HOME

- **Arrange for play dates.** Invite friends to play with your child at home or at the park. Give your child an opportunity to test out and develop his social skills in a comfortable environment with you nearby for support.
- **Offer cooperative and turn-taking activities.** Help your child learn to make friends and play with others by offering games and activities, such as Candyland or two-person catch. Share cooking experiences, such as pouring and beating the milk while creating pudding together for a yummy snack and good conversation.



- **Decorate friendship valentines.** Provide art materials so your child can show her friends how much she likes them. Why not create and send valentines to special friends all year long? The notes might say, “You are my friend because. . . .” Encourage her to sign her name and then deliver the friendly messages.
- **Cultivate intergenerational friends.** It’s important for your child to have friends of all ages. He might learn a skill, such as how to hammer nails, from your neighbor, then help that neighbor by shoveling snow. On a weekly trip visiting an assisted living center, your daughter might learn about plants as she gardens with a senior friend. And your son can develop a long-distance friendship when he gathers materials for care packages to ship to military personnel overseas.
- **Bring home a four-legged friend.** Consider adopting a rescue dog. This special-situation puppy needs love and care and will eagerly befriend your child. My two grandsons, Owen and Adam, have loved their experiences adopting furry friends. Onyx and Bruno have helped both boys discover the joy of their dogs’ loyalty and have helped to teach them how to handle responsibility.

RELATED BOOKS TO READ WITH CHILDREN

Alborough, Jez. 2001. *My Friend Bear*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.

Hutchins, Pat. 1993. *My Best Friend*. New York: Greenwillow Books.

Lobel, Arnold. 1979. *Frog and Toad Are Friends*. New York: HarperCollins.

Marshall, James. 2008. *George and Martha: The Complete Stories of Two Best Friends, Collector’s Edition*. Boston: HMH Books for Young Readers.

Munson, Derek. 2000. *Enemy Pie*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

2

LEARNING TO SHARE AND COOPERATE

Sharing—an action that enables someone to take a turn using or enjoying something that belongs to another person

Cooperation—a process that involves people working together and being helpful to accomplish something

An inability to share can spark conflicts among young preschoolers, and a willingness to share can promote positive relationships and fun play experiences. Naturally, not all children develop these skills at the same age or to the same degree, but these snapshots will help you know what you can probably expect to see as sharing and cooperation evolve:

- Three-year-olds have difficulty sharing personal possessions.
- Three-year-olds feel that they don't have to share if they have the object first.
- Three-year-olds sometimes may not want to share their teacher's attention.
- Four-year-olds easily share ideas and materials during cooperative play.
- Four-year-olds experiment with taking turns and trading objects.
- Four-year-olds are beginning to learn how to negotiate.

Now let's take a look at some of the types of challenges that might arise in the classroom as preschoolers are faced with sharing issues and opportunities to play cooperatively.

All curled up on her rest mat, Emma, a young three-year-old, snuggles with her teddy that she brought from home. Settling in comfortably, she rubs the ears of Bear-Bear. When Mia reaches over to pat Emma's cherished bear, too, Emma cries out, "No! Bear-Bear is mine!" Then she hugs him tightly to keep Mia from touching him. Because her nana gave her the bear, it is very special to Emma, and she has no intention of sharing her prized personal possession.

Emma's teacher, Mrs. Lopez, intercedes and tells Mia, "Emma needs to hold her special Bear-Bear. It is important to help her rest. We'll find you another soft teddy bear to cuddle so you can nap, too."

When three-year-olds, like Emma, identify strongly with a possession, they feel almost as if they are giving away a portion of themselves if they have to share the item. Mrs. Lopez treats Emma's anxiety with respect because she understands Emma is not yet socially or emotionally ready to share something this personal. Emma needs to feel secure about her ownership of the bear. She must feel comfortable that if another child touches or borrows her toy, it will come back to her. Still very egocentric, Emma does not yet feel that it is okay for others to play with Bear-Bear, even temporarily.



The concept of sharing becomes even more difficult for Emma to understand during play time, when Mrs. Lopez tells Emma she must give the xylophone to Galina and let her have a turn. Emma exclaims, "I had it first! It's mine now!" Because Emma physically possesses the instrument, she truly believes that she alone has the right to play with it. Mrs. Lopez patiently tries to explain to the girls, "Toys and things that belong to the school must be shared by all of the children at the school."

Sharing can indeed be confusing for young three-year-olds, who find it difficult to see a situation from another's point of view. For instance, Gunner waits unwillingly while his teacher holds a cup very still for Marvin as he slowly pours juice from a pitcher. Gunner

wants her to help him too, and he doesn't want to share her attention. Gunner becomes even more impatient when his teacher tells him he has to wait his turn.

While three-year-olds Elsa and Callie play together outside, Elsa hands Callie a pretty stone that she found. Callie smiles and taps it with her finger. Then Elsa gives her another stone. Callie bangs the two stones together. Both girls laugh at the clacking sound.

Because the rocks do not actually belong to Elsa, she does not feel threatened as she initiates sharing these items with Callie. Unlike Emma and her prized Bear-Bear, Elsa does not have a vested interest in the rocks, so she feels empowered to test out the sharing process. During this simple interactive activity, the girls discover that sharing and playing cooperatively can be fun.

When preschoolers reach three and a half years old, through time and practice they begin to feel a little more comfortable making decisions about sharing. Now that they have learned that lending an item is a temporary situation, they are not quite so protective of the materials they are sharing. They may even spontaneously begin to share if they know something will be returned. On the other hand, they will be quite stressed if someone takes something they are playing with without asking permission. And they certainly will not be pleased if another child tries to keep the borrowed object permanently.

Tossing a bean bag back and forth, young preschoolers Nicky and Ling are enjoying their simple cooperative game. It is fairly easy for the boys to relate to each other one-on-one as they share the bean bag. When a third child attempts to join in, however, it becomes rather overwhelming for them to take turns and share the bean bag. They may even exclude the newcomer from the activity.

In contrast, four-year-olds tend to be eager to share without even being asked, especially if they are enthusiastic about working on a small project together with their buddies. For instance, as these preschoolers are intensely involved in an assembly line fashion in their "fast food restaurant," they chant, "Burgers on the buns; pickles on the burgers." Their self-initiated cooperative effort involves fascinating dialogue paired with lots of action. Zoe shares her idea for how to create a luscious, round hamburger bun by pressing down on playdough with a biscuit cutter. Lily and Emily take turns exchanging kitchen equipment, such as tongs and a slotted spoon, to cook their french fries perfectly. These make-believe chefs learn that it's exciting to share ideas, real materials, and each other's company in a cooperative venture.

By the time they become four, preschoolers discover that they are sharing almost everything with their friends. They love sharing silly riddles and outlandish jokes. They adore sharing outrageous stories with each other about mile-high skyscrapers or a kingdom of

miniature dinosaurs. Job sharing is fun too, as they cooperatively create a human chain to rapidly stack a heap of blocks back on the shelves.

While working on projects, problems often arise when several children wish to use the same materials. As Caden and Logan play auto repair shop, they each want the single wrench. In an attempt to solve their problem, Logan offers an enticing trade to Caden. “How about I give you two radiator hoses if I can have the wrench?” Older four-year-olds are beginning to learn how to negotiate. Sometimes they go to great lengths to get something. Caden needs Logan’s new tire for his car. He offers to show Logan how to change his battery while adding a little bribe to up the ante. “You can go to the Six Flags Water Park with me this weekend if I can have your tire.” Logan agrees.

Because four-year-olds are empathetic, they are able to share their feelings with each other. Suzanne tells her best friend Claire, “I am feeling sad because my daddy’s being sent overseas with the Army.” Claire hugs her friend and says, “I understand. My papa and mema took their RV back home to Florida. I miss them a lot.” The girls feel a little better after they share some markers for drawing and create cards to let their special relatives know how much they love and miss them.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Arrange for activities to share.** Place a huge ball of homemade playdough in the center of a table. Encourage children to break off pieces and make something exciting together. Put materials on shelves at eye level with easy access so preschoolers can quickly spot items to play with and share together, such as board games, farm-animal figurines, or Bristle Blocks.
- **Offer cooperative activities.** Suggest some activities that don’t require tangible materials. Children could try singing hand-clapping chants and add-on songs, such as “There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly.” Try noncompetitive activities, such as having a bucket brigade to fill the sandbox or turning the egg beater to whip up pretend cream or create butter. Help preschoolers focus on having fun while sharing activities and working together.



- **Make games of sharing.** When there is only one piece of equipment available, encourage young children to brainstorm what to do. With one wagon, children might take turns riding and pulling. Or they could fill the wagon with toys. Then some might push while others pull. Children could create a share-a-song; one friend starts the song, then the other finishes it. Model how to use silly words or rhyming sounds, such as “Row, row, row your boat/Putting on your coat.”
- **Work out a sharing system.** Young preschoolers worry about a friend keeping something forever. Try setting a timer. Explain that the loaned item comes back after she hears the buzzer. Knowing when a turn will be over may encourage a child to share another time.
- **Temporarily remove a problem object.** During my first year as a preschool teacher, one yellow and three red tricycles were delivered. No matter what we tried, everyone always wanted the yellow trike, and squabbles ensued. After retiring the yellow trike several times, we finally painted it red! Years later, we still refer to an impasse situation as a “yellow-trike event”!

OTHER ASPECTS TO CONSIDER—ALERTS

- **Do not demand that a child share.** Sharing is not always a realistic expectation for young children. Actually, you might inspire anger or resentment if you pressure him by saying such things as “Don’t be selfish.” “You are acting greedy.” “Nice boys share!” Give him a choice about sharing. Respect where children are developmentally.
- **Learning styles and individual temperaments influence a child’s ability to cooperate and share.** When a child has strong interpersonal skills or is reflective, she may quite naturally demonstrate generosity. Others who do not possess these traits may exhibit a more difficult time cooperating and sharing.
- **A young child may not wish to share a personal item.** If a child cannot bear to lend certain personal objects from home, such as his favorite blanket that he uses to go to sleep or a special doll that is a present from his aunt, you need to help the other child find a suitable substitute item to play with so she feels she has your support. The child may need to place his personal possession away in a designated safe place when not using it so as not to tempt other children.

ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS TO TRY AT HOME

- **Help initiate sharing.** Do not overwhelm your young child. Start out very basically to make it easy to share with a friend. Offer a simple form puzzle or four-piece puzzle for the friends to

put together. Then stimulate sharing by increasing the complexity of the materials offered; you might add miniature cars to go with Lego bricks or plastic cups to play with in the sandbox.

- **Develop basic rules.** Discuss things your child may not want to share, such as his favorite truck he got for his birthday. Think about things he is willing to share, such as fingerpaints or wooden blocks. Talk about how important it is for everybody to ask permission before taking others' belongings or things they are working with. To reinforce the rules, complement him when he remembers to ask first.
- **Use duplicates to increase cooperation.** Because it is quite difficult for young preschoolers to share and play cooperatively with others, arrange to have extras of interesting toys, such as sand pails or fire helmets, during play dates. Using duplicate old cell phones as props could inspire great cooperative conversations. It's much more pleasant for children to not always have to wait for a turn.
- **Enjoy cooperative jobs.** Have fun working together to perform household tasks. See how fast they go! For instance, have your child sweep while you hold the dust pan. One person can spray water on a dirty window as the other wipes it clean with a paper towel. Be spontaneous.
- **Participate in community sharing.** Provide your child with art supplies so she can create cheerful holiday decorations for seniors' trays for Meals on Wheels deliveries. Help her sort out toys, books, and clothes to donate to needy families at the homeless shelter or to another relief organization. Wash old towels to share with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals for soft animal bedding.



RELATED BOOKS TO READ WITH CHILDREN

- Dewdney, Anna. 2012. *Llama Llama Time to Share*. New York: Viking.
- Hoberman, Mary Ann. 2000. *One of Each*. Boston: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.
- Hutchins, Pat. 1989. *The Doorbell Rang*. New York: Greenwillow Books.
- Lionni, Leo. 1996. *It's Mine!* New York: Dragonfly Books.
- Rosen, Michael. 2005. *This Is Our House*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.