What to say when your toddler won't share

"At the playground my two-year-old screams "Mine!" and won't let another child touch his truck. I end up prying it out of his hands. What do I say?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Share nicely! Give it to him right now."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"You're playing with the truck now. When you're finished, it's Sam's turn. Sam, want the digger while you wait?"

"Share nicely" asks a two-year-old to do something most children his age can't yet do on demand: give up what he is using, for someone else, now.

What the research found

In an experiment, children of 18 and 25 months could pull a handle that gave a snack to themselves only, or to themselves and a friendly adult, at no cost to them. When the adult said nothing, both ages chose at random. When she said what she wanted, the 25-month-olds shared and the 18-month-olds did not. Even early sharing, in other words, depends on another person making their wish clear.

In a study of children aged three to eight, most three- and four-year-olds kept treats for themselves when given the choice, while most seven- and eight-year-olds preferred equal shares. Fairness of that kind grows across early childhood. These were games with sweets, not toys at a playground.

ZERO TO THREE's guidance for parents says sharing skills tend to develop around three and a half to four. It suggests letting a child have a "long turn" before sharing, and using a timer, so the bell decides, not the adult.

What the words do

Take 2 makes it his turn, which he can understand, instead of a demand to give the truck away. "When you're finished, it's Sam's turn" tells both children there is a next. Offering Sam something while he waits helps the waiting child, which is half the job. The truck changes hands, just not out of his fist.

If you live in two homes

Toys that live in one home, or travel between homes, can matter more than they look: they may be the thing your child carries from one place to the other. Treat a travelling toy as theirs, not as a shared toy, and agree with the other home that it moves with your child.

In the UK

In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

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5. UK Parliament (2014). Children and Families Act 2014, section 12: Child arrangements orders.
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This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.