What to say when your six-year-old won't share her things

"My six-year-old won't let her little brother touch any of her things, and when a friend comes over she hides her toys. Should I make her share?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Stop being selfish. Share with your brother, or I'm taking it away."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"These are yours. You can choose a few special things to put away. Everything left out is for taking turns. Who goes first, and how long is a turn?"

"Stop being selfish" makes a six-year-old defend her things harder. A rule that lets her keep some things, and shares the rest by turns, gives her something to agree to.

What the research found

In a study of 40 families with a two-year-old and a four-year-old, researchers watched the children's disputes over toys at home. Who owned a toy generally won out, both in the children's arguments and in how the disputes ended. Parents supported sharing, but the sharing rule mainly held when a parent stepped in. Children, in other words, take ownership seriously, and a rule about sharing that ignores it tends to need an adult to enforce it.

In a study of children aged three to eight, most three- and four-year-olds kept treats for themselves, while most seven- and eight-year-olds preferred equal shares. Your six-year-old is in the middle of that change. The study used sweets, not toys, so it shows a direction rather than a rule.

ZERO TO THREE's guidance on sharing suggests letting children have a long turn, using a timer so the bell decides, and asking children for their own ideas, which they are often good at.

What the words do

"These are yours" starts with what she cares about. Choosing a few special things to put away protects them without a fight. "Everything left out is for taking turns" is the rule, and asking her who goes first and how long a turn lasts gives her a hand in making it. A rule she helped write is easier for her to keep.

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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6. Department for Education (2014). The Children and Families Act 2014 (Transitional Provisions) Order 2014, SI 2014/1042, article 6.
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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.