

Teaching Cooperation – Early Childhood

Encourage turn-taking. As young as 6 and 9 months, babies can begin to engage in back-and-forth interactions. They also learn to imitate. This is a great time to encourage turn-taking as you talk and play with your baby as it helps her learn language and the joy of relationships. When you place a block in the bucket, give her time to copy you. Take turns putting objects in the bucket and dumping them out. As she gets older, take turns putting pieces in the puzzle, or shapes into the shape sorter. When it's time to clean up, you can make a game of taking turns placing toys back on the shelf. These experiences are opportunities for her to feel the pleasure of accomplishing something as a team.

Do chores together starting at an early age. Let your child grow up experiencing the benefits of cooperation. Even 1-year-olds can help set the table and clean up toys. Point out the advantages of cooperating: "Look how fast we set the table. Now we have time to read a book before dinner." Or, "Boy was it fun to wash the car with you. You are a great scrubber! Look how bright and shiny you made our car!"

Explain your reasons for family rules and helping each other out. By age 3, most children use and understand language well enough to handle simple explanations. Point out how rules benefit the whole family: "We all help clean up. Then we don't lose our toys and we can find them again." Or, "When you help me put away the laundry, I finish quicker and then we can play."

Take time to problem solve. You can help your older 2- and 3-year-olds come up with solutions to everyday dilemmas and encourage cooperation at the same time. First, state the problem. "You want to draw on the wall but mommy says no." Next, ask a question. "Where else could you draw?" Finally, problem-solve together. If your child can't think of an acceptable option, offer two choices, both of which are acceptable to you — perhaps drawing on paper or a cardboard box. If she insists on drawing on the refrigerator, set a limit: "I'll put the crayons away until we agree on a place to draw."

Give specific praise for cooperative efforts. Point out why and how your child's contribution was important. This helps her recognize and value her skills. "You picked out all the white socks and put them together. That helped me finish the laundry quicker. Now we have more time to play." Or, "You put the books away on the shelf. Now it's easier to choose one. Would you like me to read to you?"

Offer suggestions, not commands. Suggestions elicit cooperation. Commands often evoke resistance. "It is cold so you will need to wear a hat. Would you like help putting it on, or do you want to do it yourself?" This is likely to bring about a better response than saying, "Put on your hat."

Give your child choices while maintaining the rules. "Teeth need to be brushed at bedtime. Do you want me to brush your teeth first, or do you want to brush first?" Offering choices shows your child respect, and respect creates a sense of collaboration.

Adapted from National Center on Infants, Toddlers and Families