

Parallel Play: Encouraging Toddlers with Sharing

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Becky Sughrim: Like you said earlier, Mike, sharing is hard and it can be hard, even for adults.

Mike Browne: I don't even feel like sharing. As an adult, I'm like, "get your hands off my plate, that is my food! I don't like sharing."

Becky: Hello, and welcome to "Parallel Play: A Podcast for Educators Who Love Toddlers," where we focus specifically on toddlers and how best to support their development. My name is Becky Sughrim, and my pronouns are she/her.

Mike: I'm Mike Browne, my pronouns are he/him, and we're from the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning, or the very easy acronym of NCECDTL.

Becky: I am so excited because I have been waiting to talk with you about toddlers and sharing. It's a topic that came up so much when I worked in group care, and now at home with my 2 and 1/2-year-old just a little background before becoming a part of NCECDTL, I was an infant/toddler coach, and before that, I worked in a group care setting with infants and toddlers.

Mike: I love this topic, I was waiting for you to finish so I can say my part. I am absolutely looking forward to this conversation and I've worked in many different roles in a group care setting as well. I've been a support staff, a substitute, a coach, I've been in leadership, and now I'm working indirectly as a coach and consultant. I like this topic, and I like all the many different hats that I wear because it means I can take a whole system approach to support toddlers, which is an age group that we often overlook.

What I love so much about this podcast and even the couple of episodes of Teacher Time that we did together, which you can always find on the ECLKC website, under the Teacher Time series, is that we are thinking about how we can bring the whole community together to support the toddlers that we care for.

Becky: I completely agree. I love this idea of the whole community coming together to support the toddler. Especially with something like sharing because, as we know, sharing is a lifelong skill and an important skill that toddlers and adults need when building and maintaining relationships.

Mike: I know there are times when I don't even feel like sharing. As an adult, I'm like, "get your hands off my plate, that is my food, I don't like sharing." Also, just like being in relationships with people and community, sometimes you kind of want some time and space for yourself.

Becky: I can totally relate to both of those things and, I think about the times when sharing has brought so much joy to an interaction I had with someone or I got to witness. That moment

when you share with a toddler, and their like face lights up and their eyes get all big and you can see the excitement on their face, it's the most wonderful thing.

Mike: I can picture it now, and in fact, let's listen to what sharing might sound like in a learning environment with toddlers.

[Audio begins]

Ada: Strawberry?

Teacher: I think Samara's playing with the strawberry, Ada. She's saying, no, thank you.

[Children babbling]

Teacher 2: Oh, I bet we have another. Is there another measuring cup over there? Because there's one, and Xena would like to play with one too. Let me see if I can find you another one.

Teacher 3: Oh, did you see that? She gave you the green crayon. Leila, thank you for sharing.

[Audio ends]

Becky: As a refresher, sharing means to use, give, or enjoy something jointly with another or others. I love that this definition highlights the joy that sharing can bring.

Mike: Sharing a hug with a toddler after asking if that toddler would like a hug, we don't want to just reach in and be like, "give me a hug." We want to promote bodily autonomy and consent. Even sharing a meal with the children family style, depending on the licensing of your state and program practices that guide mealtime.

Becky: As you mentioned, Mike, sharing can be hard even for adults. Did you know that most people believe toddlers should learn how to share before the age of 2?

Mike: Always with the fun facts, I love it. Research tells us that sharing skills typically begin to emerge between 3 and 4 years old. Even then, remember, it is a developmental spectrum that we are working with. Each child can reach it faster or slower. Why is it between 3 and 4 years old? That is because 2-year-olds are beginning to learn that other people have different perspectives and how to respond to those different perspectives, so sharing is a brand-new concept to toddlers.

Becky: In addition to that, the frontal lobes of the brain that control cognitive self-regulation or executive functioning skills, like problem-solving and impulse control, doesn't develop until a child is 3 or 4 years old. That part of the brain is just starting to develop in the second year of life.

Mike: A special part of our frontal lobes, the prefrontal cortex, is involved in behavioral and emotional self-regulation skills which are a big part of sharing. Self-regulation is the ability to manage our feelings, our actions, our behaviors, so we can be in relationship with others, so we can engage with others.

Becky: When we think about a toy struggle and talk about engaging with someone else, self-regulation plays an important role that the toddler has to be able to control their impulses to reach out and get the toy, and instead, ask, "can I use that, please?"

Mike: That is not an easy thing to do. It takes a lot of brain power and practice with the support of an adult through that co-regulation. Adults can co-regulate with toddlers when they create learning environments that support positive peer and adult interactions. They're responsive to their cues and what they create and maintain caring relationships with each child. If you want to learn more about co-regulation you can check out the "Parallel Play" episode on self-regulation and reframing the terrible twos.

Becky: Mike, did you know that when we look at the Head Start Earlier Learning Outcomes Framework or the ELOF, sharing doesn't come up until they're preschool domains.

Mike: I learn a new thing every single day. But Becky, can you remind us one more time, where we can actually find ELOF?

Becky: You can find it on the ECLKC website, or in the ELOF 2, the number two, Go app, or ELOF at Home app.

[Music]

When we're looking at relationships with other children, subdomain of social-emotional development within the ELOF, children ages 16-36 months might join in play with other children by sometimes taking turns or doing a joint activity with a common goal. Like building block structures with each other or pretending to eat together.

Mike: It makes sense with the research that we talked about earlier. Children understand and can share generally between the ages of 3 and 4.

Becky: Before we jump into how to support toddlers in learning how to share, let's listen to another toddler audio clip.

[Audio begins]

Child: Mine, mine, mine, mine.

Teacher: Would you like a turn with the football, Daniel? Yes, you would.

Child 2: For you.

Teacher 2: Thank you. I'll share with you. One for you, one for me.

Nella: I don't want it!

Teacher 3: What happened? What happened? Why are you upset? What happened? She took your bowl? Well then, what would you say to her? What do you want to say to Alice? You tell her, "I'm not done yet," Nella.

Nella: I'm not done yet.

Teacher 3: Nella, so then you need to be done, because [Inaudible] And then, when he is done, then he can let you use it. Okay?

[Audio ends]

Mike: Although children might not develop the ability to share until they are preschool age, children develop at different rates and in their own way, we can support toddlers in learning how to share in those many different ways.

Becky: I'm so curious to know Mike, do you have any intentional activities or experiences you introduce in the learning environment that promote sharing?

Mike: Yes, I do. Something as simple as our morning routine of singing a greeting song. Toddlers need to wait until they hear their names to stand up or wave their hands or move their bodies in whatever way they like. I like to challenge toddlers to do their favorite yoga pose. This way, they are learning to wait for their turn, it can also be intentionally using the word, O-U-R. Sometimes I say that kind of funny. But our, to describe materials in the classroom, like O-U-R books, O-U-R balls, O-U-R stacking blocks. But I want to throw this right back to you, Becky. Are there things adults need to do to set themselves and their environment up to be able to promote sharing with toddlers?

Becky: Oh, totally. One of the first things we can do is to adjust our adult expectations and remove our judgments of the toddler. In moments when we think sharing should definitely happen, we have to remind ourselves that the toddler is not being mean, that they are not a terrible friend, that they are not being selfish, and yes, that one day they will learn how to share. I want to put in an important side note here, that we should not expect or ever expect a toddler to share their beloved items that are used for self-regulation, like a special stuffed toy or our favorite blanket, I know there's a child that we've worked with or we currently work with who has that special lovey that they need throughout the day, and we shouldn't expect them to share that with anyone else.

Mike: Well if you get to do an important side note, I want to do one too. That's also important that we are mindful of our presence, our attitudes, our moods, our energy, our body positioning, and the tone of voice when we are engaging with the children. This can communicate so much to our little scientists who are observing everything we say and everything we don't say, and everything that we do and everything that we don't do.

[Music begins]

Narrator: If you've enjoyed this episode of "Parallel Play," make sure you check out "Teacher Time," a series of webinars that provides teachers and family childcare providers with content knowledge and teaching practices related to child development. Find separate "Teacher Time" webinars for infants and toddlers and preschoolers on approaches to learning, inclusion and belonging, exploring STEAM, and many more topics on the ECLKC website, under Teacher Time Series.

Mike: When you see a child struggling over a toy, I always suggest we take a deep breath and see this moment as a learning experience for the children involved, as well as for yourself.

[Music ends]

So take that deep breath, walk over to the children, and if you think of course safety is concerned, walk over there a little bit more quickly, and the key is to try to stay calm so you can help the toddlers stay calm or become calm. We are co-regulating with the child to help them access the parts of their brain that will help them self-regulate and be more flexible in their thinking.

Becky: After you've walked over to the children, you might sit next to the toddlers and make sure that everyone stays safe and narrate what you see happening. This could sound like, "oh, I see you're both holding onto the truck." Sage is holding on so tight and his face looks red, and Zeya is holding on so tight also, and she has tears coming down her face. When we're narrating, we want to try to be factual with what you say and state exactly what you see, not what you perceive to see. This might be a moment to kind of check any biases or judgments you have of the toddler. This is especially important if sharing is challenging for a particular child.

Mike: Then you can say something like an open-ended question, as opposed to a leading question. You can try something open-ended like, "what are we going to do here?" And then, of course, pause, and see what the toddlers come up with. Toddlers are very creative problem solvers, especially when they feel supported in trying out their own ideas. You never know what they're going to say.

Becky: That is so true! The toddlers might give you a suggestion for problem-solving or they might stare at you, processing what you've said, or they might continue to struggle over the toy. If they respond verbally or nonverbally, you have empowered the toddler in that moment. By asking them to create a solution, you have sent a very clear message that you think they are capable and emerging problem solvers.

Mike: I love that. If they don't suggest a solution, they look at you like, what are you going to say? You might respond with something like, "I can help you figure this out. I believe I saw Zeya playing with the truck when Sage came over. Is this true?" Then you wait for them to respond to confirm the story or not. Then you can say something like, "Zeya, you can have a turn and when you're finished, Sage can have a turn." Something that I've been thinking about in

reflecting over here in my own practice, is the idea of almost kind of forcing children to share, is the use of a turn taking board as a visual support. In this situation, so Sage can see when their turn is or maybe you have a sand timer that shows when Zeya's turn will be over.

The thing I've been reflecting on is, is this forced turn taking? Or that individualizing for the child to meet the needs in this moment. Am I providing the right amount of support for this specific child? Some toddlers are able to communicate their ideas and are ready for a bigger role in creating solutions, while some toddlers might need some more structured support. There is always a time and a place for sand times and turn-taking boards to support toddlers practicing the regulation and communication skills they need to be successful when sharing. This won't feel like forced turn-taking or force shared when those supports are individualized for a specific toddler and meets their needs at that moment.

Becky: Thank you so much, Mike, for sharing your reflections, I completely agree with you. I think it's so important for us to sit in this gray area and intentionally reflect on our teaching practices. If you're interested in trying out the turn-taking board or creating a sand timer to support clear expectations, we recommend using the search term, visual supports, on the ECLKC website. There are so many options to choose from to start with and test out, and reflect on. Let's go back to our little scenario here, while a child is waiting for their turn, you could offer to help Sage find something to play with while they wait.

You could say, "your turn is next, Sage, would you like me to help you find something to play with while you wait for the truck? I know playing with the truck was your first choice, do you have a second choice?" And waiting is so hard! It's so hard for everyone, it's especially hard for toddlers. When you see that Zeya is finished with the truck or her turn is over, you can provide positive reinforcement on how she was able to take turns. And provide Sage with that positive reinforcement for waiting and taking turns as well.

Mike: I wonder if I can do the same thing on airplanes when everyone stands up at the same time to try to get off the plane, but I digress. I do want to point out that taking a toy away doesn't solve the toy struggle or support the toddlers in learning how to take turns or share. I know that when things feel overwhelming, this can feel like the best option. It's important to take that deep breath, remain calm and approach the situation as a learning opportunity for everyone.

Becky: We want to be there during the interaction to help the toddlers move through the process together, while also keeping everyone safe. We know that with repetition, toddlers will learn these skills. How to take turns and how to ask another child for a turn, or how to ask if they can play too.

Mike: When thinking about children who are dual language learners, or multilingual learners, it would be helpful to learn some words in the child's home language so the child can hear those words while you're narrating the toy struggle. You can say things like if you speak Spanish, right? [Speaking Spanish] Or in English, "I'm here to help you, let's take a deep breath."

Becky: In addition to using visuals of turn taking, you can ask families how they respond to toy struggles and what words they use in those situations in their home environment, or in other environments outside of the childcare setting.

Mike: Taking turns and supporting turn taking is a big way we can support toddlers in learning how to share and it comes up a lot throughout the day. Back and forth conversations are natural turn-taking opportunities, like we're doing right now, Becky. The toddler says something, then the adult has a turn to say something back, and you continue taking turns back and forth, as long as the toddler is interested and engaged in the conversation.

Becky: Or, peek-a-boo is another one where the toddler takes a turn by hiding or covering her face and the adult has a turn when they respond, "Where is Eloise?" Then the toddler has another turn when they uncover their face or pops out from their hiding place or says peek-a-boo. Others also might make up their own turn-taking games. The other day, we were in the car with my son and he was singing a song, and he would sing a few words and then he would say, "your turn Dada!" Then my husband would sing a few words. They went back and forth a few times and it was such a wonderful moment.

Mike: It's important to name when toddlers share, when they point out when they give another child a toy, or when they share a hug or when you sit down for a meal. You can say something like, we're all sharing this food together. Or when two toddlers are sitting in an educator's lap, sharing that space. There are so many times when sharing naturally happens in the learning everyone.

It's so powerful for anyone to name these moments. When we notice and point out when toddlers are sharing, and the impact of sharing helps them learn that sharing is a social behavior. Like your son singing songs in the car. His sharing made it a fun activity for everyone in the car.

Becky: Reading books about sharing, using social stories about a child sharing a specific toy, or having puppets role-play sharing and taking turns, can also be helpful for toddlers. When possible, we encourage you to try and find books that are in or have been translated into a child's home language. Additionally, a huge part of sharing is language and communication skills, and the educators in our toddler audio clips in this episode have done so much language modeling and scaffolding of language around sharing.

Mike: It can be so helpful to have multiple items in the learning environment, especially when toddlers are beginning to learn how to take turns. This can help lower the overall level of frustration that might arise while waiting and learning this new skill.

Becky: Adults and toddlers can only handle so much frustration and it's extremely challenging to learn or practice this new skill when you're overwhelmed.

Mike: I think by bringing in or putting out a few different types of multiples, that can support collaboration where sharing is practiced with adult support. I think about if your program is

able to, you can definitely bring in or put out many different multiples, like a whole box of chalk, and that can support children in playing with items on their own to practice independence because children need practice with both, collaboration and independence skills. Let's take another listen to a toddler audio clip.

[Audio begins]

Child: Can I use it now?

Teacher: You asked nicely. Matelli wants to share too. Want to try it again? Okay.

Amani: I want yellow.

Teacher 2: You want yellow?

Amani: I want yellow.

Teacher 2: Darwin, are you finished with yellow? You finished? Okay, here, Amani, I'll put yellow on your side.

Teacher 3: Are you guys taking turns? Would you like to have a turn? Okay, Kaden's turn, now who's turn is it to put one on top? It's Marcos' turn. Marcos, did you hear that? He said, "It's your turn."

[Audio ends]

Becky: We've talked about the research, adult expectations, and some ways we can support toddlers in learning how to share. Another important piece of sharing is finding out what each family's cultural expectations and values are around sharing.

Mike: Getting to know families and asking them what their expectations are, how they value sharing, and when they share at home will provide the educator with very helpful information about the toddler's experience with sharing. It will help the educator meet the toddler where they are developmentally, of the skill. And it'll help honor the family's values.

Becky: That is so important, and supports belonging and family engagement. We all have different expectations based on our family culture, on our values, beliefs, and experiences, and it's important to talk about them and find out when our expectations match someone else's and when they don't.

Mike: What I think you're getting at right here is the fact that how we view sharing and ownership is rooted so deeply in our culture. Does the child come from a culture what toys and items belong to everyone, or do they come from a culture where items belong to the person who it's given to, or who it was purchased for?

Becky: And how do we culturally sustain both and all these values on sharing?

Mike: I think it's about being aware of differences in our expectations. That means taking that self-reflective activity and thinking about how was I growing up? What culture did I grow up and how that effects our expectation, will help educators answer the question, do I respond with patience and guidance in the situation the same for all children?

Becky: This is also such a great conversation to have with coworkers, and asking those questions that you asked, Mike, reflecting on our own experiences talking about that with coworkers. If you work with another adult or multiple adults in the learning environment.

Mike: I also think this is one way that coaches or managers could support educators as well. Have a conversation about individual expectations and family expectations. How they are each supported. How does it translate into the learning environment.

Becky: Educators could also ask their coach to help them answer that question, do I respond with patience and guidance in this situation the same way for all children? Specifically, during opportunities where toddlers are trying out the skills involved in sharing.

Mike: This connects back to what we talked about in the beginning. Letting go of our adult judgments and expectations around sharing. This is not easy to do and having a conversation about this with a coach or a colleague could be beneficial. Share this podcast episode with them and have a discussion around it is, well I'm biased, but it's also a very great idea.

Becky: Sometimes it can feel like a huge weight lifted to connect with someone about things that we're struggling with. I know when I worked in group care, nap time was challenging for me, and I remember saying that out loud to my coach and that was the first step to changing my perspective and my practice.

Mike: I also think it's important to note that it's important to be mindful of each child's and each family's context. Sharing isn't easy and for some, it can be even more challenging when resources are limited or it feels limited, it's super necessary to be mindful of this and honor those feelings and realities.

Becky: I completely agree with you, Mike. Honoring that reality, validating the feelings, and being a respectful detective to find out what sharing does feel comfortable for the child and family and starting there.

[Music]

Before we wrap up, I want to let our listeners know that there are many valuable resources on the ECLKC website about positive behavior supports, social emotional development, and many other topics all about toddlers.

You can find other podcasts like this one on several different topics and we hope that you will check out the resources and that you find them helpful.

Mike: We encourage you to think about one thing you are going to do to support toddlers in developing sharing skills and to think about your expectations of sharing.

Becky: We hope that you will please share what you learned with us in the Teacher Time community on my peers with colleagues, friends, and families of toddlers. Thank you so much for joining us today and we'll talk again soon.

Mike: Thank you, bye.

[Music]