

Share and Share Alike?
Lynda Sutherland
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No fair! Boy, if I had a nickel for every time I've heard that! And, like most parents, I was often called upon, when my kids were growing up, to arbitrate a dispute. So I'd stop what I was doing, listen to the situation (and the accompanying accusations), and make a *very fair* decision.

NO FAIR! They would *both* wail. Well. That went well.

Kids are selfish. At least that's the conventional wisdom. They want their own way. When you tell them to share, they hold onto their prized possession as though their life depends on having it – even if they hated that toy until their friend decided to play with it.

But as I watched my children grow and develop, I noticed something that didn't seem to add up. There were times when they were extremely *un*-selfish. I'll never forget my 18-month old toddler struggling to hold the door open for me when I came home with my arms full of groceries. Or my four-year-old, who learned it was his best friend's little brother's birthday, and spontaneously gave him his favorite truck.

Teacher Tom, the Seattle pre-school teacher whose blog I follow, shared this observation the other day:

Some time ago I found myself in a friendly debate with a professional who I hold in high esteem. He argued that young children are essentially selfish. Not that he was judging them, but rather, he believed, the ability to view the world unselfishly was a developmental stage that most preschoolers had not reached.

I've not found that to be true. Certainly, young children can be selfish, just like all of us, and some of them tend to be more selfish than others, but every day, all around me, I see young children disproving my esteemed colleague's theory. What I do see are children objecting to being told what to do. I see them sulking when commanded into sharing. I see them reacting angrily, sometimes even violently, to having something snatched from their hands, but, almost without fail, when a child *asks* for a portion or a turn, they receive it, usually gladly. Every day, I bring conflicts to an end, or even nip them in the bud, by simply pointing out, for instance, "Eleanor doesn't have any play dough," a piece of information that a young child might not have discerned on her own, but that once clearly stated will respond to by generously breaking off a piece of her own play dough for the child who has none. Even in the lead up to the December holidays, I've discovered that children are at least as excited about the gifts they are giving as those they are about to receive.

http://teachertombsblog.blogspot.com/2018/02/unselfish.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+TeacherTom+%28Teacher+Tom%29

The blog "How Babies Work" reported on research into the development of what they call prosocial behavior as babies become toddlers. The findings suggest that babies are

wired to learn how to be helpful, to share, and to care. The article says, “In study after study, toddlers act not as the spawn of the devil but as good Samaritans. When the situation is clear enough—when it isn’t a scrum in the sandbox—toddlers are often charitable and deeply generous. They willingly work together with adults on new tasks. They voluntarily help out when an adult drops or is missing something. They share food; sometimes they even share toys. They respond empathetically to someone in distress.”

http://www.slate.com/blogs/how_babies_work/2013/05/08/toddlers_learn_sharing_and_cooperation_from_the_environment_not_from_parents.html

To me, it is incredibly reassuring to know that there is something innate in our human nature that predisposes us to learn generosity, fairness, and cooperation. This means to me that there is hope that we may emphasize and cultivate this side of us, and learn more peaceful and less exploitative ways to treat each other as humans sharing this earth.

Celia Brownell, a psychology professor at the University of Pittsburgh, has studied how prosocial behavior develops through everyday social experience as toddlers mature. Very young children are quick to help when the need for that help is obvious. It takes them some years, however, to learn to pick up on subtle cues that indicate a need. If an adult says, “I am cold, I could sure use a blanket,” a child as young as 18 months will bring over a blanket. However, shivering and going “brrrr” is lost on a young child; she simply won’t pick up on the fact that the adult is cold and could use a blanket. By 3 years, most children will understand and respond to such subtle cues.

While we have an inborn urge to be generous and helpful, some types of sharing are easier to learn than others. The type of sharing that calls for cooperation, such as sharing a blanket, is learned much earlier than the type of sharing that calls for sacrifice, such as giving taking turns on the swing or giving away half your cookie. And even as adults, it is harder to want to share if sharing becomes too much of a sacrifice for us. I’m not sure that’s necessarily a bad thing; I think it’s self-preservation.

About the age of seven, most children become obsessed with rules, right and wrong, and fairness. Of course, it’s always a lot easier to see what’s fair or unfair *to them*, and much harder to look at it from the other side.

However, there’s good news on this front, too. It appears that we humans have an innate feeling of fairness that we can build upon, too.

One recent study showed that our objection to unfairness holds true even for the person who benefits from the unfair situation. In this study, one of a pair of strangers was randomly designated as rich and given \$50 in cash. The other person was “poor” and got no money. Then, as their brains were scanned, each was shown an additional amount of money that one of them might receive.

It's not surprising that, when the poor man saw the potential of his receiving a bonus, two areas of the brain that decide how much we like something, showed more activity. What was surprising was that the reward center of the rich man's brain also showed more activity at the idea of the poor man's getting a payout. Even more surprising was that when the rich man got even more money

while the poor one stayed poor, brain activity went down, showing that he found this less rewarding.

It's possible that serotonin, a brain chemical that helps control mood, contributes to the unpleasantness we feel about injustice. Research shows that as serotonin falls, we react more strongly to inequity. In other words, our sense of fairness isn't based entirely on social rules we've learned. It's an integral part of the way our brain responds to rewards: We like to see the underdog win. <https://www.webmd.com/parenting/features/teaching-children-to-be-fair#1>

Fairness, though, is incredibly subjective. It's much easier to understand when some situation or person is being unfair to me, than it is to recognize the unfairness happening to someone else. I have to have empathy for another's feelings, to put myself in their shoes, in order to recognize unfairness to another person.

In 2013, Minnesota had put an initiative on the ballot to pass an amendment to the state constitution, banning same-sex marriage. Activist working to defeat the amendment were seeing virtually no progress in changing people's minds, no matter what logical arguments they used to point out how unfair marriage discrimination is. However, when they changed their approach from trying to persuade, to trying to connect, things began to change. They would ask people about their own experience of falling in love and deciding to get married. Then they would talk about a gay or lesbian friend who had fallen in love and become committed to a partner, and how much they longed to have their relationship publicly and legally recognized. People could suddenly relate, could see "those gay people" as just like them, and to realize that the laws were being unfair to them. And the proposed amendment was defeated at the polls.

Understanding what's fair becomes even more difficult when someone with very different needs and desires is involved. That's why social justice activists are, more and more, stressing the importance of actually listening to the people whose lives are affected by unfair laws, systems and practices. It's why, in the 1970s, women became increasingly vocal and insistent that men, no matter how well-meaning and kind, stop trying to decide what women wanted and needed. No, we don't all need or want to wrap ourselves in saran wrap so our husbands will want us more than they want their secretaries at work. We need laws protecting us from being re-victimized in rape proceedings; we need control over our own money so we can actually leave if we are victims of spousal abuse. It's not ok to have to have our husbands sign in order to open a bank account!

So I try to listen when my friend and colleague with cerebral palsy posts about the many humiliating and discouraging hurdles she has to face in order to just live in the world: the bus drivers who refuse to stop for her because they know it's time consuming to load her and her scooter on the bus, and they don't want to be bothered; the cashiers who address their questions to her spouse even though she is making the purchase and paying for it; the many, many times her scooter is lost or damaged in transit by the airline; and so much more. During the recent storms, I was very, very gratified to hear Governor Charlie Baker ask people to please check the sidewalk ramps that allow access to the crosswalks, to keep them shoveled off after the snowplows barrel down the streets and push snow into their path. It showed me that he has been listening to those who need the ramps to get around.

Being fair is often something that must go beyond the rules. Being fair includes how those rules are carried out and applied in specific situations. That's why we teach our kids, fair doesn't always mean equal. But it takes time, and an openness to look at things from another, sometimes unfamiliar point of view. And it's not something you achieve and then, whew, got that figured out. The quest for fairness is, and always will be, a moving target, something we have to engage in regularly.

As I became a more experienced mother, I stopped trying to referee and learned better ways to help my kids get along with each other. One of the things I did was to teach them the principles of sharing – dividing things, taking turns, helping each other get their needs and wants satisfied while being mindful of others' wants and needs. Listening to each other. If your brother says it hurts when you punch his arm, believe him, even if punches to your arm don't feel painful to you. Figure out how long each person gets the swing, and here's a timer you can use if you want. You don't have to share your favorite toy, but don't bring it out in front of others if you aren't willing to let others have a turn with it.

Then I let them work out together what would be fair. They had to work it out without violence, shouting, name-calling, or taking a nasty tone of voice with each other. But other than that, I mostly let them work it out.

And wonder of wonders, most of the time, after they worked it out, they both felt it was at least relatively fair, and were better able to let it go if this time, it wasn't (in their opinion) *all the way* fair.

I think we can take great comfort from knowing that, as we work to make our civic and community institutions more just, and to promote the common good, we are not working entirely against human nature, but actually are helping people remember and develop tendencies we were born with. May we work toward a fair shake for everyone in ways that are ever more empathic and considerate, is my hope for us today.