

Question: My toddler constantly grabs toys out of other children’s hands and says: “Mine!” How can I stop this behavior?

Grabbing toys and insisting that everything is “Mine!” is typical toddler behavior. Very young children view the world through their own wants and needs, and having a growing sense of themselves and what is theirs is a positive step in their development.

Toddlers are working on their ability to control their impulses so they can successfully interact with others. There are many things you can do to help your child begin to understand what belongs to him and what belongs to others as well as how his actions affect others by promoting the life skill of Perspective Taking.

Perspective Taking goes far beyond empathy; it involves figuring out what others think and feel and forms the basis for children’s understanding of their parents’, teachers’ and friends’ intentions. Children who can take others’ perspectives are also much less likely to get involved in conflicts.

1 Help your child feel known and understood and to understand others.

Ross Thompson of the University of California at Davis has found that some children learn Perspective Taking better than others. Through his own and others’ research, he concluded that how children gain insight into “what goes on in people’s hearts and minds” depends on how parents interpret “the everyday events of their lives.” Especially important is explaining the child’s and others’ thoughts and feelings.

Your interactions with your child are his model for building relationships. When your child feels supported and cared for, it will be easier for him to connect with others throughout his life. Some things you can do are:

- Repeat back your child’s words, or what you think he might be trying to communicate: “You want that truck!”

Martin Hoffman of New York University coined the term “other-oriented discipline” to refer to a technique that parents use with their children. In his research, he found that children were more considerate of others when parents briefly explained the impact of the children’s behavior on others.

- **Describe what you see going on, like a sportscaster:** “You want that truck so much that you are taking it from your friend Thomas, but it belongs to him.”
- **Talk about others’ thoughts and feelings about the situation:** “I can see on Thomas’ face that he is upset when you grab his truck. You would probably feel the same way if

Thomas took your boat.”

Martin Hoffman found that when parents used harsher techniques like criticism, threats or physical force, children were unable to understand what the lessons were that parents were trying to teach.

2

Set limits, but set them in a way that helps your child learn how to deal with this kind of issue in the future.

Rather than criticize or label him as “grabby,” help him learn how to deal in a positive way with possessions that belong to others.

Come up with possible solutions:

- “Maybe if you ask Thomas for a turn with the truck and you let him play with your boat, he will let you play with his truck.” If that doesn't work, help him come up with other possible solutions:
- “You want that truck, but here is something else that you can play with.”

If he gets very upset at not being given what he wants immediately, know that this is typical toddler behavior. You can restrain him and tell him that you are not going to let him take other children's toys:

- “I am going to hold you until you calm down, but I am not going to let you take your friend's toy.”

Let your child know that you've experienced similar emotions:

- “I know how it feels to want something so badly that you just want to take it, but I have learned to ask.”

3

Use other everyday moments to help your child know what is his and what belongs to others.

There are many opportunities to point out what belongs to whom. If he, like many toddlers, says “mine” about a lot of things, talk about this:

- “Yes, this is your home. It is your home, and it belongs to all of us, too.”
- “No, that truck we saw on the street is not ours. It says on the side of the truck whose truck it is. I will read you what it says.”

4

Use other opportunities to help your child understand the perspectives of others.

Children learn best through direct experience, and each day offers countless opportunities to promote Perspective Taking in your child. When you talk about feelings, whether they are your own, your child's or those of others, you are helping your child make sense of himself and his place in the world.

- **Acknowledge your child's feelings:** “You seem really angry right now. It's hard to wait your turn for a toy.” This helps him make connections between his emotions and his actions.
- **Share your own feelings and how you deal with them:** “I've had a long day and I am tired, just like you are tired after playing all day.” It is important to make sure your child doesn't think your feelings are his fault and that you share your strategies for dealing with your emotions: “You know how you like to sing when you feel upset? I'm going to listen to some music by myself and then I will feel better.”
- Encourage your child to think about the reasons behind people's responses to everyday situations: “Why do you think your uncle got upset when his friend forgot his birthday?”
- Look for moments when your child is engaged in cooperative play with others and support those interactions: “You rolled the ball to your friend and he rolled it back!” These moments are the beginnings of sharing and taking turns.

5

Use books and television or movies to have discussions about other people's wants, needs and feelings.

Reading and watching television with your child can be a launching pad for discussions about feelings and can help your child connect his own experiences to those of others.

- Point out people's faces in books and on television for your child to get clues about how the characters are feeling: “Look, that little girl is crying. She has a sad face.”
- As your child grows, ask questions about characters in books that you read or on shows that you watch: “How does that character feel? Why does he feel that way? What makes you think so?”
- Encourage your child to make connections between his life and the characters in books or movies: “The boy had so much fun at that party. Do you remember how happy you were at your birthday party?”

6

Give your child many opportunities to pretend.

According to Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Berkeley, when children pretend, they are figuring things out:

What's it like if you're a mommy? What are mommies like? What are daddies like? What are babies like? Those are ways that children are actually actively experimenting, actively trying to figure out what's going on with other children, [what's] going on in other people's minds.

When children are pretending, they're not just having fun; they are taking on different roles and “trying on” the perspectives of others. Pretend play is a safe and enjoyable way for children to explore their experiences and practice skills of Perspective Taking before using them in the moment.

- Encourage your child to extend his experiences by giving him props. An old phone is a fun toy and a great way for your child to practice saying hello and goodbye or to pretend to go to work just like you!
- When you see your toddler pretending, go along with it: “You are putting your bear to bed because he is sleepy. Does the bear get fussy when he is sleepy?”