The Blossom Guide to Not Sharing

Yes, you read that right. This is the Blossom Guide to NOT sharing. I know. It sounds mad - given that we are brought up being told we must share, but read on to find out why experts now think it is the wrong thing to tell our kids.

Old habits Die Hard.

Most of us are in the habit of thinking that sharing is a good thing and something that should be encouraged in our children. Child development experts are now re-thinking this and seeing that projecting adult concepts like sharing onto very young children can cause emotional problems and difficulties for them as it teaches the wrong message.

We think that if we don't encourage children to share, then they will grow up being unable to do it, and other children won't like them. We have all been in the situation at the playgroup or a friend's house when our child refuses to share a toy. We often try to persuade our child to give it up, but why? Is it to save embarrassment for us? Or judgements over our parenting? Dislike of our child, or for the other child? All are perfectly understandable for us to not want, but they are not necessarily thoughts that benefit our child.

Understanding Each Other...

In the early years, children are learning understand and negotiate their own needs. They lack empathy because they have not yet developed what is called Theory of Mind. This is an understanding that others have a different point of view than you. Most young children develop this around the age of 3 or 4 and even then, it takes them a while to finesse this so they can truly understand another person's view.

This means that complex concepts like borrowing or sharing are too complex for young children. Forcing your child to share does not teach the social skills that we want toddlers to learn; instead, it may send many messages we don't want to send, and may actually increase how often our toddlers throw a tantrum.

According to clinical psychologists, teaching children to share can teach children the wrong lessons, such as:

- Crying loudly gets them what they want.
- That you should give in to someone who shouts and makes a fuss.
- That you should always do what others want and what adults say, even if you don't want to.
- Parents are in charge of who gets what and when.
- Play and ideas are not valued - that children should interrupt what they are doing to give something to someone else, just because they want it.
- Power lies with the person who wants the toy, not the one who had it first and is using it.
- That rules are different for children than adults.
- That co-ersion works
- When you do what adults tell you then they are happy with you and that is more important than your own happiness.

These are not the intended messages that we want to give, but they are the ones we reinforce if we force children to share - and when you look at it like that, it makes me wonder why we ever do it!

So What Can We Do Instead?

If you provide your child with the language and confidence to advocate for themselves then you can encourage them to sort sharing problems out without help. Teaching them to negotiate a time when another child can have their turn is fine. Teaching this method through schools and play dates allows them to get used to trying different strategies and building up their confidence to say no when they really don't want to and the awareness to give other people a turn if they do want to. The ideal is for our child to control their impulse to grab an item, and develop the ability to work out the situation with words. Modelling patience and providing them with the appropriate language to use will enable them. This approach teaches them important life skills. If adults set all the limits and direct children all the time, then they don't develop their own ability to regulate their own emotions, set their own boundaries or advocate (speak up) for themselves.

Learning To Be Kind.

If children can play freely in ways they have chosen themselves, and can decide when they have finished with a toy, they can feel generous and kind in giving the toy to a friend and making them happy. This builds self confidence, empathy and altruism. Being able to hand a toy over when they are ready encourages self regulation, self discipline and the reward of feeling satisfied when they chose to let someone else have their turn, without always being told to. This is how children learn to be kind.

From the other perspective, teaching your child that they should ask for a turn, wait for their turn, be patient, and to value someone else's play is fundamental. Experiencing how waiting feels and what it feels like when you are given the toy is how they then learn when to give the toy up themselves when they are in the other role. The end result is an understanding of empathy, generosity, and patience, and a child who can understand and negotiate more complicated emotional situations as they grow up.