

# All mine?

In part four of her series on the behaviour of two-year-olds, *Julia Manning-Morton* looks at possession and social rules



In the last article in this series, ('Me time', *Nursery World*, 9 March), we identified the primary task of two-year-olds as 'being and becoming themselves'. This aspect of development is sometimes interpreted by adults as anti-social and egocentric, unable to consider others and unwilling to share and co-operate in a group.

But those working closely with two-year-olds in settings where their characteristics and development are understood will refute this view. They will testify to the enormous interest most two-year-olds have in being with, playing with and forming friendships with others.

## THEORY OF MIND OR MINDSIGHT

It is fair, however, to say that although two-year-olds frequently show empathy and concern for others, they often struggle with understanding and keeping other people's needs in mind.

As adults we use a wealth of experience and our self-knowledge to 'read' others' expressions and body language and, from that information, infer what they are thinking and feel-

ing. This is called having 'Theory of Mind' or 'Mindsight' (Siegel 1999). But, of course, our two-year-olds have only two years' experience and limited self-awareness to draw on to do this. They are still at an early stage of understanding that other people may hold different viewpoints, desires, wishes and motivations from them.

## POSSESSION

This immature (although rapidly growing) understanding of other people's minds means that two-year-olds' own need for things like the red cup or the big bike will often override their ability to let another have the desired item.

Another reason for this is their understanding of possession, which is closely bound up with using an object, and their developing sense of self. Therefore if a child has been playing with the dumper truck, the creative process that they experience is part of them and the truck becomes 'mine' and remains so, even if they leave it while they do something else.

Both these aspects of a two-year-old's development, combined with their immature social skills, limited

**Two-year-olds' level of empathy, for example, is immature but developing fast**

language and strong emotions, may then put them on a collision course with those around them. So, a tussle over the dumper truck, when another child picks it up to play with it, will often result in a child snatching it back and possibly hitting out if resisted and then refusing to consider the adult's offer of an alternative (Manning-Morton and Thorp 2003, 2006, 2015).

## SHARING/TAKING TURNS

Practitioners may be tempted to respond to such situations punitively by saying, 'You must share', or, 'If you can't share, you can't have it at all!' However, a two-year-old's development of 'Mindsight', plus their immature understanding of time, means that expecting them to understand and accept concepts of sharing and taking turns is akin to expecting them to be able to add up or turn cartwheels.

Also, it is probable that the practitioner has possessions that they wouldn't dream of sharing or may

even complain when someone else uses 'their' cup in the staff room!

Practitioners often concentrate on the ability to share and take turns as the focus of social learning, yet these skills are only part of developing social understanding. Thinking carefully about how to facilitate thoughtfulness, kindness and empathy in young children needs to come first.

### FRIENDS AND ENEMIES!

Children's friendships are a key way in which they hone their social skills because, although they can practise social skills with adults, play with peers requires them to adapt more to a less socially skilled play partner (Manning-Morton 2014).

To support two-year-olds' ability to make friends, it is useful for practitioners to understand the pattern usually taken as they initiate a new friendship. First a toddler will watch with interest, then imitate the other child, then add another feature to the imitation. If the overture to be friends is accepted, this gets adopted by the new friend who then transforms it again into something new.

In this way, young children's friendships tend to be formed around common interests and, conversely, arguments and enmity arise from conflicting interests or different children with different schemas being expected to play with the same equipment in the same area.

Having open-ended resources, such as sand, cornflour and paint, will cater effectively for children's different play agendas and choices to play alone or together. Also, flexible materials such as corks, lengths of material or cartons can be played with differently, and having plentiful amounts of such materials reduces the need to share and, therefore, reduces conflict. This same principle of duplicates should be applied to books, wheeled toys and components in construction sets (Manning-Morton and Thorp 2015).

Conflicts also arise because being sociable all day long can be hard work for two-year-olds. If practitioners reflect on how stressful and tiring it can be to be part of a large group on a training course, for example, they will appreciate how being in such a situation with the far fewer social skills of a two-year-old may lead to arguments and emotional collapses. Two-year-olds should not have to be part of a large group for prolonged periods of time.

Employing strategies such as making small, enclosed dens from large cartons and lengths of material will encourage easier social interactions between two or three children. There should also be opportunities for children to do things alone, and protecting an individual child's wish for privacy, whether in the bathroom or the book area, for example, is important.

Also, the overall size of a group for two-year-olds should be kept as small as possible; communicating, relating, concentrating and relaxing are all more difficult when surrounded by a lot of people.

### SOCIAL RULES

Social rules can also be a source of conflict, though more with adults than with other children. Although two-year-olds are rapidly gaining understanding of how the world works, there is still a great deal to confuse them in this area. For example, a two-year-old, when asked if they would like some fruit, may not understand that the social rule is that you only take one piece!

Also confusing is the way adults approve of a behaviour in one situation but not in another – for example, throwing a ball is praised, yet throwing other toys causes censure. Obviously, practitioners must teach children what things are fine to do and where, but need to do this with understanding of the confusion in the child's mind and with explanations rather than condemnation.

### SUPPORTING SOCIAL UNDERSTANDING

A two-year-old's ability to develop 'Mindsight' and empathy depends largely on the quality of their attachment relationships at home and in the setting. Also, children whose families frequently talk about emotions are more able to understand that different people can feel differently about the same thing (Dunn *et al* 1991). So, effective practice means considering the quality of practitioners' relationships with their key children and how they encourage children to talk about their own and their friends' feelings.

This requires that children always have a caring adult on hand to sup-



### MORE INFORMATION

- 'Me time', part 3 in our Behaviour series on two-year-olds, [www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/feature/1150178/positive-relationships-behaviour](http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/feature/1150178/positive-relationships-behaviour)

port their social play through helping them to notice and consider each other's responses. This also ensures that many of the conflicts between very young children are avoided or more helpfully resolved, as the practitioner will suggest useful language for children to use in their negotiations and compromises.

Most importantly in these social mediations, the involved practitioner shows that they are trustworthy. This means explaining what turn-taking is, ensuring there is only a short interval to wait and always keeping your word. So when a practitioner promises that a two-year-old 'can have a turn next' or 'can do more painting after lunch', that is what must happen – or, next time, why should they comply?

When two-year-olds can rely on their close adults to manage these processes in a fair and just way, they learn that delayed gratification does not mean no gratification and that waiting and turn-taking can aid their friendships. Very importantly, quiet, compliant children can trust the adult to ensure that their needs are not always overridden by more confident peers.

This is an important aspect of a partnership approach to children's behaviour. Two-year-olds are beginning to understand how others' plans differ from their own; in situations where there are competing needs, the practitioner's task is to find a way of moving away from a confrontation to a negotiated agreement. By engaging in negotiation and compromise, practitioners are modelling flexibility and mutual consideration, which are vital life skills. ■

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