Teaching children to cooperate

“What can I do with this child? When the other children are working on an art project, she doesn’t want to do it. When I ask her if she’s ready for lunch, she always says no. When everyone wants to play outside, she throws a tantrum. When will this child learn to cooperate?” — A frustrated caregiver

Learning to cooperate means that a person can think about and balance their own needs and wants with another person’s needs and wants. Many people think that cooperation means the child does what the adult wants. That’s not the case. True cooperation is a give and take between people that ends up with something they both agree on.

Cooperation is a skill that must be learned. Here are some things you can do with the children in your care to help them learn the skill of cooperation.

Taking turns.

Babies as young as six to nine months can begin learning to take turns. Start by playing games with a baby where you do something, then ask her to do the same thing. You drop a block in a bucket, and then give her a block to put in the bucket. As the baby gets a little older, try rolling a ball to her and have her roll it back to you. For toddlers and preschool-age children, taking turns is a good way to help two children who want to play with the same toy at the same time. Tell the child who had the truck first, “Carla, you were playing with the truck, but Julio wants to play with it too. Would you tell Julio when you are finished playing with it, so he can take a turn?”

Teach children the skills to learn how to cooperate.

Explain the rules.

Children as young as two can begin to understand simple reasons. When you remind children of a rule, give them a simple reason. “Please stand back from the stove. It is hot and you could get burned.” “Keep your feet on the floor, so you don’t kick anyone and hurt them.”