

Taking Turns

Since one of our jobs as parents is to teach socially acceptable behavior, we need to teach our children to take turns. It's not something that comes naturally to most children, especially when there are siblings involved.

One method for teaching little children to take turns is to count to 10 while one child has a turn. For example one child is on a rocking horse till the count of 10, and then it's the next child's turn. The other children learn quickly that they will get a turn, and they won't even have to wait too long. An additional plus to this method is that they learn to count to 10. I've seen children have as much fun counting as they do rocking on the horse.

We've found that the timer is a great help in teaching children to take turns and keep track of time. See if this is familiar to you:

Kathy: Tommy, you've been using the computer all day. It's my turn now.

Tommy: That's not true! I just got on it. Mom was using it before.

Kathy: You've already played "Ski" five times.

Tommy: I have not!!!

Mom: It looks like this is a job for the timer. Starting now, you kids will have 15 minutes at a time to use the computer. When the timer goes off, it's the other person's turn. If you need the computer to do your homework, you'll be able to use it for 45 minutes at a time if the other person is waiting for it. Since Tommy has already had a turn, Kathy, you can use the computer now for 15 minutes.

Tommy: But mom, I haven't used the computer for a whole 15 minutes yet.

Kathy: You've been using it for an hour!

Mom: Calm down you two. Kathy will have her turn now. I know it's hard to tell how long you've been on the computer unless you use a timer or look at the clock. From now on make sure and use the timer whenever you use the computer. I'll even buy an extra one so we can keep it in the study.

Kathy: Can we each have more than 15 minutes at a time? Some games take longer than that.

Mom: That's a reasonable request. Lets talk about it and see if we can come up with a something we all agree on.

(A discussion follows and Kathy and Tommy both agree that 30 minute turns would be better.)

Mom: I'm glad you two could agree on this. Let's try 30 minutes for a few days and then we'll check in to see how it's working out.

In this situation Kathy and Tommy want to use the computer by themselves and since there is only one computer, taking turns is an effective solution. The timer can be used as an impartial indicator of when each child's turn has ended.

Key Points

- A timer can be used for taking turns in situations where there are fewer pieces of equipment than there are children who want to use them.
- When you allow children to be a part of the solution, they are more likely to have “buy-in” and to follow the agreed upon rules.
- When possible, agree on a reasonable amount of time for each general category of equipment that is fought over. For example; 5 minutes for the swing, 10 minutes for ping-pong, and 30 minutes for the video games.
- Have a timer readily available so that older children can use it themselves.
- Write your family agreements down so that everyone is clear about the guidelines.
- The time you set for a turn will depend on the child’s age and the type of activity. Generally speaking the younger the child the shorter the turn. Waiting is a skill we have to learn over time. And as most adults know, it’s a skill you use often in the real world.
- If there is conflict over who goes first, flip a coin. It’s a fair way to decide, and most kids will go along with it. No one will cry that the coin loves the other child more.
- Praise your children for using the timer correctly, especially if they’ve been able to use it on their own. By doing so you are reinforcing acceptable ways to work out conflicts. Praise and encouragement are key ingredients to successful discipline.
- Give consequences for not following the agreed upon rules or if your child resets the timer. An example of a logical consequence for Kathy or Tommy would be taking away their computer privileges for the next day. Don’t be too harsh. Children will learn their lessons with consequences that are reasonable.
- Everyone will be happier when things go smoother without constant fighting and bickering.