



## peace at the playground

Public play areas are veritable breeding grounds for less-than-desirable behavior—on the part of kids and parents alike. Here, our experts shed light on how to make the experience more enjoyable for everyone.  
By Alexa Joy Sherman





**if you've ever** taken your toddler to a public playground, you've likely been faced with at least one disconcerting dilemma or etiquette issue. After all, when you put dozens of pint-size strangers in contact with each other and then mix in a boatload of sand, a bunch of cool equipment and perhaps an oblivious parent or two, it's no wonder these allegedly restful retreats often feel more like war zones than fun zones.

Not only do different ages, personalities, standards and parenting styles come into play, but the excitement of being in a new and stimulating environment can cause simple manners to fly straight out the window, notes etiquette and protocol consultant Melissa Leonard ([establishyourselfny.com](http://establishyourselfny.com)). But there's no need to run screaming for the safety of your own home, never to set foot in the sandbox again. Here, experts weigh in with their top strategies for cutting through chaotic and confounding conundrums so you and your child can navigate the playground and escape not only unscathed, but also more socially adept.

**(playground problem)** My 15-month-old son always seems to commandeer other kids' toys, and sometimes I can't even find the rightful owner to ask if it's okay.

**(protocol pointers)** Kids under the age of 18 months are just starting to understand the concepts of not grabbing and of sharing with others, Leonard says. "With young children such as this, constant reminders and consistency are the keys," she notes. Of course, most caregivers are happy to share their child's toys and won't bat an eye over your son taking something of theirs for the moment, but this is an opportunity to teach your son about boundaries and respect. Even as your child gets older, you can say things like "This toy doesn't belong to us" or "We need to ask permission before using other people's things." Then, rather than letting him keep the equipment, try a distraction: Encourage him to play with his own toys, suggest some time on the swings or find another activity you think will appeal to him just as much.

If you do find the owner of the toy, ask if he or she would be willing to share. When your child is 2 or older, you might even encourage him to ask permission himself, as well as offer to share his own toys. "Watch him closely and see how he interacts, and be ready to intervene if things get out of hand," Leonard says. "Keep verbally reinforcing the 'we share' rule. Kids often just need some gentle reminding and practice."

**(playground problem)** My 2-year-old daughter is constantly throwing sand at other children, no matter how many times I tell her not to and give her a time-out.

**(protocol pointers)** While situations like this may immediately seem like cause for admonishment and discipline, a lot of children simply don't understand why throwing sand isn't okay and what they should be doing differently. If your child is older and is intentionally trying to hurt someone, certainly remove her right away and talk to her about the situation, advises Kathleen Derrig-Palumbo, MFT, Ph.D., founder and CEO of [mytherapynet.com](http://mytherapynet.com). But if your child is simply being playful or careless, make sure she sees how her actions are affecting the other children. "For instance, show her that the other child is crying," Derrig-Palumbo says. "You see? Throwing sand hurts."

Then, model how to apologize to the children and parents, have your child apologize and show her how to play with sand

the right way. "Guide your child's hand down to the sand and say, 'Sand stays on the ground,'" suggests Lynne Reeves Griffin, R.N., M.Ed., author of *Negotiation Generation: Take Back Your Parental Authority Without Punishment* (Penguin, 2007) and founder of the Proactive Parenting and Proactive Teaching workshops. "Or you might give your child a truck, or move your child away from the other child and to another area." The key in all of this is taking the focus off the negative attention. After all, the more you're told you can't do something, the more you want to do it, Griffin notes. To really reinforce the positive, offer lots of praise when your child apologizes and stops throwing. Derrig-Palumbo advises.

**(playground problem)** When I take my 21-month-old son to the playground, I'm so worried he'll get hurt or hurt someone else that I stick to him like glue. But then I wonder if I should be giving him more freedom.

**(protocol pointers)** While it's a good idea to step back and let your child start to handle situations on his own, you're completely entitled to stay close so you can take over if and when he needs you. Consider your child's age, communication abilities and disposition, and act accordingly, says Ann Douglas, author of several parenting books, including *The Mother of All Toddler Books* (Wiley, 2004). "If you have a really sensitive child and you know just one accidental bump is going to set him off, maybe you're going to need to stay a little closer than a parent whose child is oblivious to getting stepped on because they're just so happy to be there," Douglas explains.

Meanwhile, experts say that staying close is far better than the alternative. "Parents and caregivers often see the playground as their break—a way for kids to keep busy while they catch up with other mothers or have some quiet time," Leonard says. "Due to this, many adults just don't pay attention and conflicts arise." In other words, go ahead and shadow your child if you think he needs it; everyone will be better off.

**(playground problem)** I once gave a little girl some of my 4-year-old's cookies and her mother freaked out. What's the big deal?

**(protocol pointers)** "Never give another child food without a parent's permission," advises Lisa Taylor Richey, founder of the American Academy of Etiquette. After all, food





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## playing well with **parents**

Sometimes conflicts among kids are minor compared to those that ensue among adults. When playground problems arise, for everyone's sake take a deep breath and try to focus on the following:

**Pick your battles.** Not every situation requires that you instigate a conversation with a child's caretaker. "If someone's going to get hurt or there's obvious bullying, draw it to the other parent's attention," Douglas notes. "But don't get into nattering about minor things." Also, this

is no time to judge others' parenting styles. "What is considered inappropriate by one parent may be perfectly acceptable to another," Leonard explains. "It's not your responsibility to be the 'holier-than-thou protector of the playground.'"

You can only teach your child to play nicely and hope her example will rub off on anyone who isn't doing so.

**Keep it constructive.** Consider all sides, focus on the situation at hand and then let it go. "Many parents

take what their kids say as gospel and believe their children can do no wrong," Leonard notes.

Acknowledge what happened and that your child may have contributed to the problem. Then let the other parent handle the situation as he or she sees fit. Remember: Your child is watching. Richey says. This is a chance to model appropriate behavior and conflict resolution.

**Exercise empathy.** We have all had days when we are just not as on top of our

game as we would like to be. "You don't know where a parent has just been or what they are going through," Derrig-Palumbo notes. "So try to put yourself in their shoes and understand that whatever's happened probably wasn't intentional."

Meanwhile, bear in mind that some parents may choose to take up matters with their children at home or away from a public setting. Leonard adds. You may not see them taking action, but it doesn't mean they aren't planning to do so.



**It takes kids a long time to grasp the concepts of sharing, being gentle and taking turns.**

allergies are rampant these days, and you never know what sort of dietary restrictions another child's parents are trying to enforce. Even if the child is begging for some of your tot's snacks, it's imperative that you get the caregiver's okay first, Leonard notes. If he or she gives the go-ahead, let your child offer some to the other child. "This will teach your child to share and may help forge a new friendship," Leonard says.

**(playground problem)** Bigger children are constantly trampling the little ones or hogging all the play equipment at our public park, and their parents are nowhere to be found. What is the best way to let my smaller children enjoy the park and still keep them out of harm's way?

**(protocol pointers)** First, make sure your kids are playing on age-appropriate equipment. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission notes that 2- to 5-year-olds should be physically separated and given more attentive supervision than 5- to 12-year-olds. "Because the majority of injuries result from falls, it's a good idea to remember the 'rule of five': Keep children under age 5 off any piece of equipment higher than five feet," Douglas says. If a smaller child is in danger, go over and tell the older children they need to act responsibly, saying something like "You're the big kids here, so watch out for the babies!" Continue to keep a close eye on the situation, and if things remain sketchy, take your child to another part of the playground or simply leave. "If you see another child about to fall or get pushed, help that child so he's not in danger," Leonard adds. "You would want someone to do the same for your child if you weren't aware of the problem."

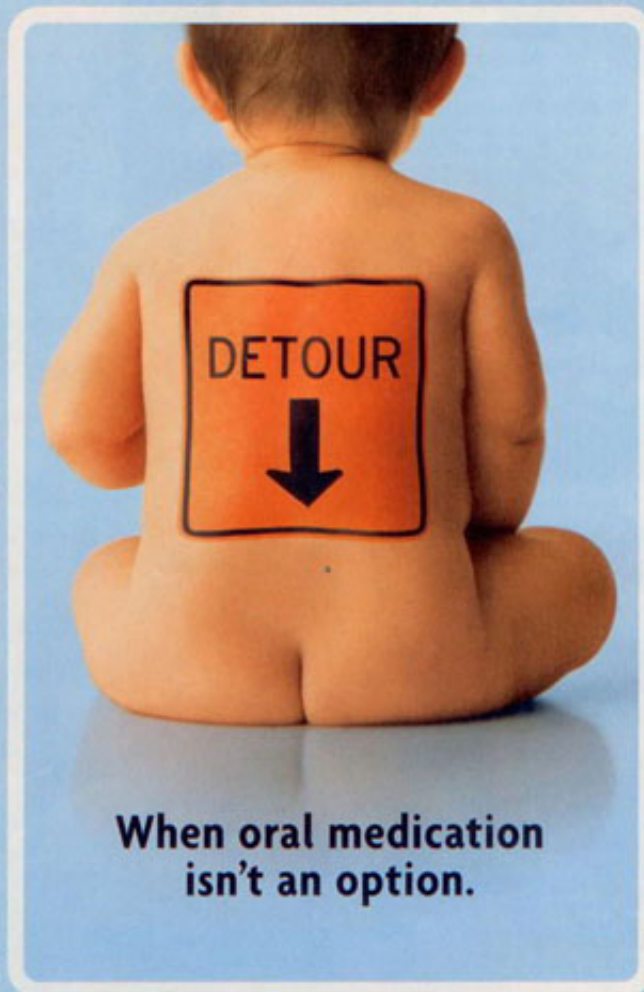
**(playground problem)** My 3-year-old refuses to share and gets really aggressive and selfish when playing on the slide.

**(protocol pointers)** It takes kids a long time to grasp the concepts of sharing, being gentle and taking turns, Griffin says. To a lot of children, those are just words and they need to have them illustrated repeatedly before they know how to execute them. Fortunately, you can begin teaching them all of these concepts and more well before you even head out the door, Griffin says. "Role-playing and scripting are two ways to do this," she explains. "You can use dolls or toys or just interact with your child, saying things like 'It's time to go down the slide!' or 'I want a turn on the swing.'" The more you prepare children for the various scenarios they may encounter, the easier it will be to remind them of appropriate behavior when you're in the moment. Keep working with your child on the appropriate ways to share and respect others, offer lots of praise when he behaves appropriately and definitely remove him from situations in which he's endangering others.

**(playground problem)** My daughter throws a tantrum whenever it's time to leave the playground. What can I do to prevent this?

**(protocol pointers)** Before you even get to the playground, it's a good idea to let kids know how long you'll be staying, and have a signal to indicate time's up, Douglas suggests. Then, as departure time nears, the countdown begins: Tell your daughter "Five more minutes and we're going home." Also, try not to let playground time run into mealtime and/or bedtime; otherwise, your daughter may be melting down out of hunger and exhaustion. Entice her with things that she'll get to do afterward: Whether it's the promise of seeing the family dog, making her favorite meal, getting to play with a special toy or book, or listening to a CD she loves on the way home, creating some excitement about leaving could be just the ticket to making your toddler more agreeable. ●

Alexa Joy Sherman is never far from her 2-year-old son Jack when they visit playgrounds near their Los Angeles-area home.



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