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# FAMILY TIES

## That's Not Fair!

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

**I**f you are a parent or a teacher, you have heard the cry, “That’s not fair!” You likely have said it yourself, even as an adult! We object when we believe we have been treated unfairly, no matter our age, and whether or not we openly acknowledge it.

Fairness is difficult to define clearly. People often see decisions that help them as being “fair” and those that do not as being “unfair.” Fairness is often a matter of perception, and often there’s more than one fair choice.

Developmentally, three- and four-year-olds who are learning about relationships and rules generally define “fair” according to their own needs and desires of the moment. I remember the Sabbath school song that began with “I have a dolly (or truck) and you have none....” Some of the more compliant children, and those who were better at understanding the concept, shared. But most often their hearts were not happy, because it wasn’t fair they had to give up their dolly or truck when they weren’t ready.

Five- to six-year-olds are beginning to understand others have rights, and are more interested in conforming to the rules. They are learning to cooperate but may respond negatively to criticism and punishment by sulking, or with what we define as rude behavior. They do better when adults help them understand why certain behaviors, like treating others with fairness, are necessary.

Seven- to eight-year-olds continue to build on their understanding of the need for rules, but sometimes find themselves in trouble for being tattletales. Often, they are just trying to figure out how the world works and if the rules are the same for them as for others. They may not always play fair and may even unintentionally break the rules because they simply can’t remember two things at once — what they want to do and what they are supposed to do. Adults can encourage these children by playing games with them and positively encouraging (as opposed to criticizing) them to learn the rules and play by them.



Ten- to twelve-year-olds check out family rules, comparing them to those of their friends and neighbors. Parents often feel challenged by their penchant for not only comparing but testing, disagreeing with, and arguing about what’s fair. It’s natural to challenge parental values one moment and then be the open, cooperative and affectionate kid another.

Throughout each stage, children deserve adults who model what fairness is and who will help them learn the skills they need to get along with others. Here’s an idea to try when conveying this important lesson: You will need one uncooked fresh egg, a clear glass filled with one cup of water, a tablespoon, and one-fourth cup of salt.

Carefully, place the egg in the glass of water. Share that the egg (you may even want to give it a name) represents someone who is not being treated fairly. The egg sinking to the bottom represents how someone who is left out or mistreated can feel — sad, depressed, defeated, unappreciated or unloved. Remove the egg from the water and set it aside. Add salt to the water, one spoon at a time, stirring in each spoonful, and explain that the salt represents different ways they can show fairness toward others. Ask for examples of showing fairness (following the rules when playing a game, taking turns, sharing, treating others with honesty and respect, taking action to help when someone is treated unfairly, etc.) After you have added all of the salt, put the egg back in the water (it will now float). Explain that now the egg is being supported with kindness and “held up” by the fairness and acceptance of others. (See <http://www.yessafechoices.com/fairness>.)

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