

Questions to consider

- Did your child correctly identify the owner of the item at the end of each scenario?
- How certain was your child of the answers they gave?
- Did your child demonstrate any simple ownership biases?

Other activities to try at home

- **Object Sort.** Have your child place objects that belong to them in one box, objects that don't belong to them in a second box, and objects that are shared with everyone in a third box. How does your child make these decisions? Ask them why they chose to put certain objects in certain boxes.
- **Found Objects.** Ask your child about a found object. What should they do if they found another child's toy at the park? What should someone else do if they found your child's toy at the park? Why?

Parting Thoughts

This activity shows adults how their child thinks about legitimate and illegitimate transfer of ownership. Children under the age of 5 may believe that gifts still belong to the giver, and may pose challenges – and hurt feelings – when they are asked to give gifts to others.

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Research Bites

Property Ownership
Who Owns an Object?

UM Living Lab @ Missoula Public Library
455 E. Main St., Missoula, MT 59802

www.umt.edu/living-lab living.lab@umontana.edu

How do children understand property ownership?



Image: Freepik.com

Does a person own something if they stole it? Or if the item was given to them? Children's answers to these questions might surprise you!

Young children may initially have difficulty understanding under what circumstances ownership changes.

Ownership Biases. Young children may use simple biases (or mental shortcuts) to determine ownership:

- **First possessor bias:** The original owner, regardless of type of transfer (stolen, given), remains the owner.
- **Current possessor bias:** Whoever currently holds the object, regardless of type of transfer, is the owner.

Mental shortcuts are normal. They get more refined and usually more accurate as children build up experiences in the world.

Researchers at Harvard University¹ found that by age 5 children correctly understand ownership when an object is given (current possessor) or stolen (first possessor). Whereas 2- and 3-year-olds have a strong first-possessor bias, no matter if an object was given or stolen. In other words, 2- and 3-year-olds understand a stolen object belongs to the original owner, but they also think a gift still belongs to the giver. Yet, by age 5 years, children understand a gifted object belongs to the recipient (and not the giver).

¹ Blake, P. R., & Harris, P. L. (2009). Children's understanding of ownership transfers. *Cognitive Development*, 24, 133-145.

See how your child understands property ownership

Read these stories to your child and ask them the questions.



Story 1. It's Jordan's birthday. Sam wants to give her a birthday present. Sam looks around his room and decides to give his **toy horse** to Jordan for her birthday. Sam gives the toy to Jordan and Jordan says, "Thank you! I can't wait to take it home and play with it!"

At the beginning of the story, Sam was holding the toy and at the end Jordan was holding the toy. **Who should take the toy horse home? Sam or Jordan?**

Story 2. On a different day, Sam brought his **toy car** to the park. Jordan is also at the park. Sam sets the car down when he goes to get a drink of water. Jordan sees the car and takes it. When Sam comes back, he can't find his car and says, "Oh no, my toy car is gone!"

At the beginning of the story, Sam was holding the toy and at the end Jordan was holding the toy. **Who should take the toy car home? Sam or Jordan?**

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