

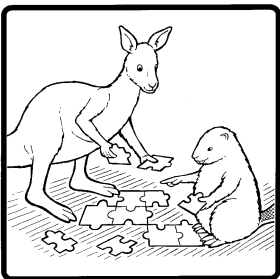
Child Care plus+

+ Children Can Use Problem Solving

Instead of planning to intervene the next time a young child asks for your help with a problem, introduce children to an effective way to handle their own challenges by teaching a problem-solving approach. Understanding the **process** of problem-solving is more important than being given a solution, because children can learn to use this strategy not only in the immediate situation but in many others.

Actively teaching and guiding children to use problem-solving promotes the development of social skills and helps children develop independence. The early childhood environment provides many opportunities to teach problem-solving.

Problem-solving is a key part of any approach to guiding behavior in group programs and includes five key steps:



- Step 1: Identify the problem.
- Step 2: Brainstorm solutions.
- Step 3: Choose one solution.
- Step 4: Try the solution.
- Step 5: Decide if the solution worked.

As you help children learn to use these steps, keep the following suggestions in mind:

- Take advantage of teachable moments to model problem-solving with parents, staff members, and the children.
- Make up stories to illustrate one or more of the steps or use puppets to reenact a problem-solving incident that happened recently using the steps in sequence.
- Use the problem-solving steps for group projects (like planning a field trip or creating an elaborate project) to provide an opportunity for children to learn the process. You can even use problem-solving in response to an immediate problem affecting all of the children, such as when it starts raining while the children are outside playing.
- In social situations, focus primarily on behavior, not feelings. Even when one child is expressing that his feelings were hurt by being called a name, it is still the hurtful

action (calling a name) that is the focus of the problem-solving.

- As you teach problem-solving skills, use the words of the steps consistently, perhaps by putting let's or it's time to in front of the words of the step, such as let's name the problem or it's time to choose a solution. Children are going to repeat whatever phrases you use as they learn to use this approach with each other.
 - Use neutral phrases to respond to children's solutions (there's one idea; what else could you do?). If your response is judgmental (that's a wonderful idea!), you limit the brainstorming process; children may think the "best" idea has already been found and they may continue to see you as the person in charge of deciding what they should do.
 - Whether they are using problem-solving to decide how to make boats float or fairly share a popular toy, be sure the children are actively engaged in each step of the process. Rather than suggesting solutions yourself, have the children generate ideas to try.
- Problem-solving takes time to learn—both in terms of the process and children's developmental stages. When you teach children this strategy, they are learning an important lifelong skill. They will need frequent opportunities to practice and your gentle assistance as they learn. Because the long-term goal is to teach children to use problem-solving as an effective way to handle problems, it is worth whatever time it takes. Before long, children in your group will say to one another, we have a problem, rather than resorting to physical aggression or running to "tell the teacher." + SAM

+ In This Issue	
+ In Focus	+ Putting It Into Practice
+ Try It Out	+ Question
+ Connecting with Families	+ Resource Review

+ IN FOCUS

The five steps in the process of solving a problem can be too many steps for some young children. Very young children, children who have difficulty following complicated directions, or children whose attention tends to wander may need extra help in identifying each step. To give children more information, use short phrases, hand signals, and gestures to distinguish each step.

STEP	SAY	DO
Identify the problem.	A problem!	Hold out your hand - palm up and open.
Brainstorm solutions.	What can we do?	Tap your palm with one finger.
Choose one solution	Choose one.	Hold up one finger.
Try the solution.	Do it.	Move hands around and around at your sides (like wheels moving forward).
Decide if it worked.	Did it work?	Use a questioning expression; hold out both hands as if to say, well?

+ SAM

+ TRY IT OUT

Puppets and cut-out characters can be effectively used to help children learn problem-solving skills. Here is a list of suggestions to help you create this activity.

- Find or make two puppets or characters. You can even use stuffed animals, if you prefer.
- Give them names (do not use names of children in your program), so you and the children can relate future situations to the puppets. For example, "remember what Tony puppet did when he and Katy puppet brainstormed? They got a lot of ideas for solving their problem first."
- Decide the problem; for example, there are only 3 chairs at the snack table and 4 children want to sit there, or Tony wants the red paint that Katy is using. Use a familiar or recent situation, if appropriate.
- Develop the story of solving the problem. You may wish to introduce all the steps one day, and then focus on one step at a time as you help children follow the steps as problems naturally arise.
- After children begin using the steps, use the puppets to positively reinforce their efforts (Tony is doing the same thing we did when we could not find the rabbit food this morning) and/or review a step that children seem to find difficult or skip.
- Leave the puppets out where the children can reenact the story and you can observe their understanding.
- Use the puppets to walk children through the steps during an actual problem-solving episode. + SLM

+ CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES

Problem-solving is an effective tool for adults, too. As you look at strengthening your partnership with families, a problem-solving approach can help you develop and maintain collaborative interactions that foster a sense of teamwork. Your shift to a problem-solving approach with families can begin with enrollment. For example, once you have shared information about your program and the parent has helped you learn about their child's strengths, interests, and needs, it can be tempting to jump right in to tell the parent how enrollment will proceed. However, if you let the parent know that you would like to "put your heads together" for a few minutes to come up with ideas to create a smooth transition for their child, you will have the opportunity to learn even more about their child AND set the stage for future teamwork when needs or problems arise.

A problem-solving approach means that you meet with parents to work together on an ongoing basis to brainstorm program improvement ideas or to resolve specific issues when differences of opinion arise or when a child is experiencing an ongoing challenge. It means approaching parent meetings with good information about what is currently happening in your program, but also with an open mind for gathering more ideas from parents and trying new ideas. A problem-solving approach builds on the joint commitment of parents and providers to work together to best meet the needs of the child and provides the added bonus of modeling an effective strategy that parents can use with their children at home, too. + SHW

+ PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

If you have never used this problem-solving approach, you may be wondering how it would look in actual practice with young children in a child care program. Let's walk together through each of the steps using a couple of real-life examples. Notice all the ways the teacher/provider lets the children direct the process.

Using Problem-Solving - Example #1:

As Georgia takes the children outside after nap time, they discover that the cover has blown off the sandbox and is caught high in the bushes at the edge of the playground. All the children gather around to see what has happened. Georgia's first thought is to tell the children she'll get it down later and send them off to play. Her second thought is that this situation is a perfect opportunity to engage the children in problem-solving about how to retrieve the cover safely (and also about how to keep it from blowing off again).

1. As the children begin to identify the problem as "the cover blew off the sandbox," Georgia gently guides them to recognize that the real problem is getting the cover out of the bushes. How can they get it down, they wonder?
2. The children gather around Georgia as she invites their solutions. How can they get it down, they wonder? Oh, the ideas that begin to emerge! "Throw rocks at it and knock it down!" "Let's throw balls at it." "Get a long stick and lift it off the bushes." "Get a ladder."
3. Eventually they choose to have Georgia climb up on the step stool, lift the cover down, and hand it to children standing near the step stool. There is a lengthy discussion about where to put the step stool and who is best to help Georgia (how many children, and did they have to be especially tall or strong).
4. Of course, they tried it, and had fun in the process.
5. They all agreed that it worked. There was a good deal of excitement as the children talked about their accomplishment!

Using Problem-Solving - Example #2:

Janee sees two children pulling on the same puzzle; she waits to see if they can handle the problem themselves.

It appears that their anger is rising. She approaches the two children calmly, kneels down to their level, and says, "This doesn't look safe. I think we have a problem."

- Janee helps the children **name the problem**. Janee asks each child, "What is the problem?" She selects one child to start while assuring the other that he will also have a turn to speak. She models statements for the children when necessary—"You both want the same puzzle."
- Janee encourages the children to **brainstorm solutions**. She provides models only until children can begin generating ideas on their own. "You could do the puzzle together. One of you could get a new puzzle." As children begin suggesting their own possible solutions, she accepts each idea calmly, "That is one idea. What else?" Sometimes the solutions generated by children can get a bit silly. Janee accepts these ideas, too—she knows that children's attempts to use humor can help diffuse potentially unpleasant situations.
- Janee allows the children to **choose one solution**. Again, she gradually fades out her assistance as children develop these skills. She respects whatever choice the children make, providing it fits within the program rules.
- Janee allows the children to **try it** to see if their solution will work. She has observed that a solution that appears unlikely to succeed may, in fact, work when she lets the children try it without judgment. She sees her role as the facilitator of children's attempts not the director of their behavior.
- Janee helps the children **decide if it worked**. She does this by asking questions or sharing her observations. She is ready to repeat the entire process if the solution does not solve the problem to each child's satisfaction.

Problem-solving is learned over time, so be patient with yourself and with the children. Your long-term goal is to teach children to use problem-solving as an effective way to handle problems. + SLM

+ QUESTION

QUESTION: I work with toddlers. Aren't they too young to learn problem-solving?

ANSWER: If these young toddlers are old enough to have problems, they are old enough to learn to solve them! Naturally, because they are so young, you will need to be actively involved in helping the children through the five steps to solving problems. For very young children, each step is slightly abbreviated and the adult is a more active guide through the process. For example, instead of generating a list of possible solutions, you might encourage the child to try a different way, combining steps three and four. Think of some of the typical "problems" children of this age face: trying to figure out how a toy works, grabbing toys from one another, not knowing how to climb onto a couch. In each of these challenges, it would be better to walk the child through a process to get to a solution rather than simply telling the child what to do. The magic happens when you fully engage the child in the process of solving the problem. Let's take the example of not being able to climb up onto the couch. As the teacher, you first state what you see. You're having trouble finding a way to climb onto the couch. (Step 1). Let's see if you can try a different way. (Step 2). You could try using your other foot. Oops, didn't work. What if you tried standing on the stool? Here, I'll help you try. (Step 3 & 4). It worked! You solved the problem and now you are on the couch! (Step 5). As children get older and have more experience solving problems, they can take a

more active role. The most important thing to remember at this stage is that you are introducing the child to an approach that will become an important lifelong skill. Keep the child interested by helping out a bit more, but try hard to keep the child actively engaged in each step of the process. +
SAM

+ RESOURCE REVIEW

Meeting the Challenge: Effective Strategies for Challenging Behaviors in Early Childhood Environments by B. Kaiser and J.S. Rasminsky is available from NAEYC for \$7.00. Published by the Canadian Child Care Federation, this book offers easily understandable ideas and strategies proven to benefit every child in the early childhood setting and to work for children with the most challenging behaviors. To order, contact NAEYC at www.naeyc.org or at 1-800-242-2460, ext. 2001 (order #300).

CHILD CARE plus+ is designed to support inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings by supporting child care providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers, and administrators. CHILD CARE plus+ is published quarterly. Subscription price is \$ 8.00 per year (four issues). Contents may be reproduced without permission; please include reference.

CHILD CARE plus+: The Center on Inclusion in Early Childhood
The Rural Institute, 634 Eddy Avenue
The University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812-6696
1-800-235-4122 (406) 243-6355
<http://www.ccplus.org>

EDITORIAL BOARD: Sarah A. Mulligan; Sandra L. Morris; Susan Harper-Whalen; and Amy Hill.

Child Care plus+

The Rural Institute
The University of Montana
634 Eddy Avenue
Missoula, MT 59812-6696

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Missoula, MT
59812
PERMIT NO. 100