Teaching Problem-Solving Skills

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Children face many challenges throughout their day – whether that's struggling to fit a piece in a puzzle, or trying to put their shoes on, or falling down, or fighting someone for possession of a toy, or feeling like their needs aren't being heard and met. Teaching them problem-solving skills will help in the moment and will also help them build independence for the long term.

When / How to Teach Skills

When challenges arise for your child, don't always leap to their rescue. Sometimes it's best to **sit back for a few minutes** to see if they can figure it out on their own. If your child is a little cranky and frustrated about a problem, that's OK. Frustration can push us forward till we have a break-through to a solution. (However, if frustration is turning into misery, that's no longer helpful, so step in BEFORE that switches over. Or, if they've already flipped their lid, then work on managing the meltdown. AFTER they're calm, you can go back to solving the problem.)

If your child is still fairly calm, but needs some support, **don't just fix it for them**. They won't learn anything from that. (And we all know how frustrating it is when we've struggled and struggled with an issue, and someone else steps in, presses a button and fixes it. We're glad it's fixed, but we may also feel embarrassed and feel incompetent at fixing future challenges.) Instead, help **guide them to finding a solution**. Here are some steps to walk through.

Step One - Define the Problem

Clarify **what is the problem they're trying to solve?** Start off with a little empathy, listening to their concerns. "Hey buddy, you seem frustrated. What are you trying to do right now?"

Sometimes they can tell you exactly the problem ("I can't find the puzzle piece!") and it's something you can see several clear solutions to. Sometimes they tell you a problem that you can see is unsolvable ("I want the broken glass to be unbroken") - you may need to help them re-frame this to something that is solvable. Sometimes you have to re-define what the problem is. They may say the problem is that "Bobby has the toy and I need to make him give it to me." You might change the problem definition: "I know you want that toy Bobby has... since you can't have it right now, let's think about *what else* you could do."

Step Two - Brainstorm Solutions

If you've got a child who is five or older, they may be able to come up with lots of possible solutions with just a little guidance. After your child has some brainstormed options, you can help them figure out if those solutions are a) actually possible now, and b) if they would actually solve the problem. Sometimes you can defuse the tension around problem-solving by suggesting some crazy wacky solutions that make them laugh.

For a 3 - 5 year old, you could help them build a repertoire of possible solutions in advance so they have ideas to draw from. For example, if you're working on challenges playing nicely with

other children, you could offer a solution kit like the one from Center on Social and Emotional Foundations. You could teach these as part of a curriculum, then when the child is having challenges, you pull the cards out and ask them which tools might be helpful at that moment.

If your child is 2, you won't really ask them to brainstorm. They won't be good at this kind of abstract thinking. You'll just suggest 2 – 3 options to them as choices they could make.

Step 3 - Try Out a Solution

Let children know that sometimes the first solution works perfectly to solve a problem. Sometimes it "almost" works and we just need to tweak it a little. Sometimes it fails completely and you need to start all over again. So, once your child has a few brainstormed options, help them plan what they'll try first, and what they'll do next if that doesn't work. (Sometimes the best thing to tell them to do next is to come back and check in with you for new ideas.)

Step 4 - Reflection

If your child solves a problem, give lots of positive attention. Don't just praise the result (the solved problem) but also praise the process: "you worked really hard to come up with a solution!" If they tried, but failed, still give positive attention: "I like that you came up with some ideas and tested them out. I'm sorry it didn't work - some problems are just really tricky."

At bedtime that night, reflect back on lessons learned. Keep it positive, and use a growth mindset approach - "you haven't figured it out YET, but keep trying, I know we'll get there."

Other Ways to Teach Problem-Solving

You don't just wait for problems to arise before you teach. You can also build a repertoire of skills they can apply when needed: Whenever we're teaching any challenging skills, whether that's cutting with scissors, putting a puzzle together, riding a bike, throwing a basket, and so on, we can teach skills they may need to solve problems in the future. You can also teach when playing side-by-side with them. For example, you could build a tower that's really shaky and ask them for ideas for how to make it stronger, then model for them some ideas you have. You could accidentally mix up two paint colors by putting the wrong brush in a cup, then talk with them about possible solutions. You're giving them tools they can use for future problem-solving, and also modeling how to stay calm in the face of challenges.

You can use dramatic play to teach, using puppet shows and role plays to act out challenges and solutions. When reading books, if a problem comes up, pause your reading and ask them: what's the problem? what are some possible solutions? what do you think the character will try?

Resource for Learning More

The Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center has a great webinar, called: "It's a Big Problem: Teaching Children Problem-Solving Skills." https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/teaching-practices/teacher-time-series/its-big-problem-teaching-children-problem-solving-skills