Teaching Problem-Solving Skills

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Children face many challenges throughout their day – whether that's struggling to fit a piece into a puzzle or trying to get dressed, not being able to climb a tree, fighting for possession of a toy or feeling like their needs aren't being heard and met. Teaching problem-solving skills will help reduce meltdowns in the moment and also help build independence for the long term.

Give them space to find solutions

When challenges arise for your child, don't always leap to their rescue. If they're just a little frustrated, **sit back for a few minutes** to see if they can figure it out on their own. Frustration can motivate us to push forward till we break-through to a solution.

If your child is frustrated*, **don't just jump in and fix the problem for them**. They won't learn anything from that. Instead, **guide them to finding a solution**, using the steps below.

Step 0 – Emotional Support

This is step zero because it's not always necessary, but when it is, you should start here!

* When a child is frustrated but still somewhat calm, they can often push through it and learn something new. But it does help if you first acknowledge and empathize with the feelings. "Hey buddy, you seem frustrated. It's hard when things don't work like you want."

If they have flipped their lid from mere frustration into misery and meltdown, they are not in the space for learning. (Literally, we have a hard time accessing our "upstairs brains" for advanced skills when we are really upset and our "downstairs brains" have taken over.) Trying to problem solve now will only prolong the tantrum. Focus on emotional support and managing the meltdown. Some *other time* when they are calm, you can work on problem solving.

Step 1 - Define the Problem

Clarify **what is the problem they're trying to solve?**

Sometimes they can tell you exactly the problem ("I can't find the puzzle piece!") and it's a problem you can see and suggest several easy solutions to. Sometimes they tell you a problem that you know is unsolvable ("I want the broken toy to be unbroken") - you may need to help them re-frame this to something that *is* solvable, or just offer emotional support. Sometimes you have to re-define the problem. They may say the problem is that "Bobby needs to give me that toy right now!" You might change the problem definition: "You really want that toy Bobby has... since it's his turn for two more minutes, let's think about *what else* you could do."

Step 2 - Brainstorm Solutions

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

For a 4 - 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 social emotional skills like sharing and playing nicely with others, you could teach ideas from a solution kit like the one from Center on Social and Emotional Foundations. Then when a child is having challenges, you pull the cards out and ask them to choose tools might be helpful at that moment. (http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/modules/2006/solutionkit.pdf)

If your child is 2 or 3, they're not able to do as much abstract thinking, so instead of asking them to brainstorm, you should suggest 2 or 3 options for them to choose between.

Step 3 – Evaluate the Possible Solutions

They will likely need your help evaluating their options. Questions to explore:

- Is that solution possible? (e.g. do we have the supplies / skills we need?)
- Would that actually solve the problem? Would it create any new problems?
- Would it be safe? Would it be fair?
- How would other people feel about that solution?

Let children know that sometimes the first solution works perfectly. Sometimes it "almost" works, we just need to tweak it a little. Sometimes it fails completely and you need to start all over again. Help them plan what they'll try first, and what they'll do next if that doesn't work.

Step 4 – Try Out a Solution

Test it out!

Step 5 – Evaluate Results, Try New Solutions if Needed

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."

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 need to wait for problems to arise before you teach. You can also help them build a repertoire of skills they can apply when needed: Whenever we're teaching any challenging skills, from cutting with scissors, to putting a puzzle together, riding a bike, throwing a basket… we are teaching skills they may need to solve problems in the future. You can also teach when playing side-by-side with them or working together. 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?