

You, Your Child, and PROBLEM SOLVING

S. Doescher and L. Burt

Why is problem solving important for families? Naturally, conflicts arise for children every day. Children who learn to figure out solutions to their problems are better able to work and play with others. The ability to solve difficult situations also builds positive self-esteem, self-confidence, and relationships with others.

Styles of Problem Solving

The family scenes below show different ways parents can affect children's problem-solving skills.

Scene 1

Four-year-old Amanda and brother Joseph, age 8, are playing grocery store in their family's garage. Joseph is the cashier, and Amanda is a customer who has just entered the store with her purse and wagon. She carefully selects many items, takes them to Joseph, and pays. After a while, Amanda announces to Joseph that it's her turn to be the cashier. Joseph refuses, insisting he's older and knows how to be the cashier.

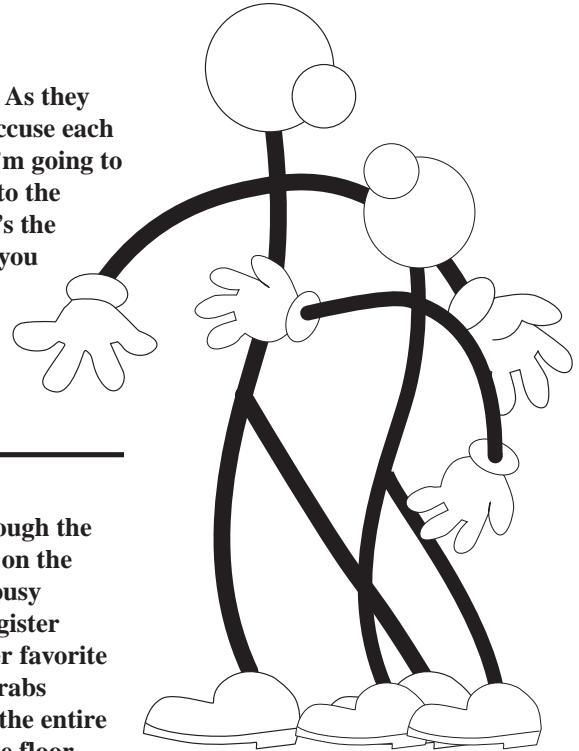
Their arguing leads to put-downs and shoving. Amanda's cart tips over and food packages scatter

all over the garage floor. As they stare at the mess, they accuse each other, "You did it, and I'm going to tell Dad!" Dad bursts into the garage shouting, "What's the matter with you? Don't you know I'm on the phone? Pick up this mess, now! Just you wait til I get off the phone!"

Scene 2

Amanda browses through the packaged food products on the store shelves. Joseph is busy counting out the cash register money. Excited to see her favorite cookie boxes, Amanda grabs several boxes, knocking the entire shelf of products onto the floor. Joseph screams, "Look at what you did, you've ruined everything. How could you do this?"

Mom opens the door and asks, "What's all the noise about?" Joseph shouts, "Look what Amanda did. She messed up the whole store, and now we can't play." Looking at Amanda, Mom suggests, "Let's pick up the boxes together, then I bet Joseph will feel like playing again." Mom hands Amanda a box, and they pick up the boxes together. Afterwards, Joseph asks Amanda, "Do you want to play store again?" "Yes," says Amanda.



Scene 3

Amanda accidentally knocks over 20 food boxes. Joseph screams, "Look at what you did. If you don't pick them up, I won't play with you." Amanda stares at Joseph in silence.

Dad enters the garage and asks Amanda, "What's happening?" She looks down and replies,

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“Joseph doesn’t want to play with me.” Dad turns to Joseph and asks, “Why do you think Amanda would say this?” Joseph explains, “She made a mess out of my store, and I shouted at her.” Dad inquires, “How did that make you feel?” Joseph says, “Mad and angry.” Dad asks, “What do you think we should do next? Do you have any ideas?” Joseph suggests, “I could play by myself.” Amanda adds, “You could say you’re sorry, then we could play again.” Joseph echoes, “You could say you’re sorry, too.” Then Dad looks at both of them and asks, “Shall we?” After they hug, Dad asks, “Who’s going to pick up the boxes?” Joseph announces, “We both will.”



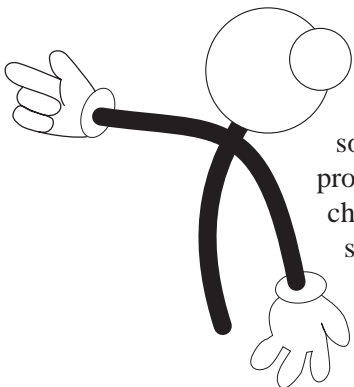
These scenes show different problem-solving approaches between children and parents. Scene 1 describes a situation where Dad is too busy to use the problem-solving process. In Scene 2, Mom directs Amanda’s behavior to eliminate the problem. However, this approach does not allow the child to solve her own problem. In Scene 3, Dad helps both children with ideas for solving their problem.

Problem solving requires time, patience, energy, and skill. Success depends on parents’ commitment to use this approach with their children to solve everyday problems. Once children acquire problem-solving skills, they will become more confident and responsible in

dealing with daily situations.

What are some typical problems young children try to solve?

Usually situations



Activity 1: Identifying Problems

Children have conflicts and problems every day. Think about one of your children. List three problems your child has had recently.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

relate to everyday problems. Children may be frustrated because:

- They can’t find a special book
- They can’t fit a puzzle together
- They want to be the leader
- They can’t get their friends to share.

The Problem-solving Process

1. Observe and gather information about the situation. When parents take several minutes to look at a problem situation, they can learn a lot about their children’s problem-solving abilities. Parents will be able to see if their children can solve the problem themselves. They also may get clues about ways to help children find a solution to the conflict.

Questions often help parents find out more about the situation. For example, in Scene 3, Dad asks Amanda, “What’s happening?” After Amanda answers, he asks Joseph, “Why do you think Amanda would say this?” By observing and questioning, Dad learns how his children respond to problems and how involved he needs to be in the solutions.

2. Help children state the problem. By asking a general question about the situation, parents help children identify the problem. Although it takes time to involve children in the process

of defining the problem, by doing so, parents show they accept children’s ideas.

For example, in Scene 3, Dad asks Joseph about Amanda’s response. The question, “Why do you think Amanda would say this?” offers Joseph the opportunity to identify the problem as he views it. He explains, “She made a mess out of my store, and I shouted at her.” Dad inquires further, “How did this make you feel?” Joseph replies, “Mad and angry.” With Dad’s help, Joseph has identified the problem. If Dad wishes, he can restate the problem to Amanda and Joseph in more concise terms.

3. Discuss with children the solutions to the problem. After learning about the situation, parents can give children a chance to suggest ways to solve the problem. It’s important for parents and other children involved not to judge the responses.

In Scene 3, Dad asks the children, “What do you think we should do next?” Joseph says, “I could play by myself.” Amanda suggests, “You could say you’re sorry, too.” Parents may wish to discuss each child’s ideas and restate the responses in a clear, concise manner. It’s helpful to write each idea down, review the suggestions, and ask for other possibilities. Children may need to explain their ideas if they are not clear to everyone.

4. *Help children decide on a solution to try.* Parents can help children review the suggestions they give to solve the problem, then share how each feels about these ideas. Parents may need to explore what will happen if the children try an idea they like.

Children may need help choosing a solution. If there is no agreement, perhaps parents and children can agree on which solution to try first. Younger children often respond positively when considering just two alternatives. Older children can think of more possibilities, such as “What is the *best* way to fix this?”

Parents’ input is helpful, too, when thinking about trying a solution. After children offer ideas, it helps to ask which solution they like best and why they like it. When children try a solution, they take charge of the problem. In Scene 3, Dad senses that his children are ready to make up and continue playing, so he facilitates this happening.

The amount of involvement or direction children need often depends on:

- How long children can discuss and focus on a problem
- How easily children can participate in a conversation
- How developed children’s language abilities, attention spans, and memory skills are
- How well children can discuss more than one possible solution
- How patient children are in using the problem-solving process.

5. *Help children seek a different solution when needed.*

Children sometimes need to discuss their problems further. Parents can help children re-evaluate the situation and come up

Activity 2: Helping with Problem Solving

Below are several situations that might occur between parents and children. First, think about the situation and the parent’s response. How would you restate the parent’s remarks in each situation so the children might feel welcome to participate in solving the problem?

- Ben and his two friends are arguing loudly in the living room. Ben’s mom yells, “There’s too much noise! If you can’t get along, I’ll send everyone home.” *What would you say differently?*
- Sally is having trouble building with her blocks. Dad says, “You can’t build the block tower? Here, let me do it for you.” *What would you say differently?*
- Steve is drinking a glass of milk and spills it down his lap. Mom exclaims, “You spilled your milk. Now I’ll have to take your clothes off and wash them.” *What would you say differently?*
- Can you think of a situation where you missed a chance to involve your children? What did you say? *What would you say differently?*

with another solution to try. Explore solutions by asking for ideas from children: “What do you think?” “What ideas do you have?” “How can you solve this problem?” In Scene 3, if Amanda continues to knock down the boxes, the children can discuss another solution.

Alternatives to Problem Solving

What can you do when there’s not enough time for the problem-solving process? Here are a few suggestions.

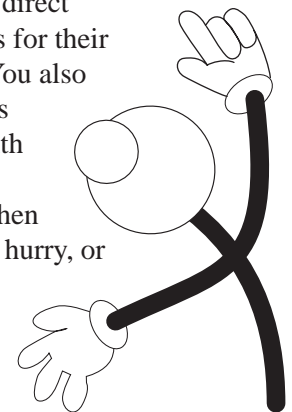
Model behaviors to show children how you would solve problems. For example, when a paper tears, use tape to fasten it back together. Children who watch others solve problems may approach their problem in a similar way the next time.

Give choices to help children make decisions and solve their own problems. Take turns with your child in coming up with

choices to try. “Would you rather take the dog for a walk or plant flowers with me today?” As children evaluate these choices, they learn problem-solving skills.

Ignore behaviors to help children who are being disruptive or are fighting for attention. In these situations, you can choose to be uninvolved if the children are safe from harm. When children don’t receive attention for negative behaviors, those behaviors will decrease.

Guide behavior by asking questions, directing, or redirecting to help children when they need more direct alternatives for their behavior. You also can use this strategy with younger children when you’re in a hurry, or when the children are tired.



For example, tell your child, "In 5 minutes it will be time to pick up toys."

Summary

Problem solving helps children resolve conflicts that arise every day. As children develop skills to solve their own problems, they also will build their self-esteem and self-confidence. Parents can assist children in developing problem-solving abilities by using the problem-solving process.

This publication has been designed to help you:

- Think about situations where your children may have problems and conflicts to solve
- Understand the steps to use in helping your children solve a problem
- Consider alternative ways for you to deal with children's problems when the problem-solving process isn't appropriate.

For Further Reading

Beekman, S., & Holmes, J. (1993). *Battles, Hassles, Tantrums & Tears (Strategies for Coping with Conflict and Making Peace at Home)*. NY: Hearst Books.

Crary, E. (1984). *Kids Can Cooperate: A Practical Guide to Teaching Problem-Solving*. Seattle, WA: Parenting Press.

Faber, A., & Mazlish, E. (1988). *Siblings Without Rivalry*. NY: Avon.

Reynolds, E. (1990). *Guiding Young Children: A Child Centered Approach*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.

Books for Young Children

Barbato, J. (1991). *From Bed to Bus*. NY: MacMillan.

Crary, E. (1986). Problem-solving Book Set—*I Can't Wait; I'm Lost; I Want It; I Want to Play; Mommy Don't Go; My Name is Not Dummy*. Seattle, WA: Parenting Press.

Petty, K. (1991). Social Skills for Kids Book Set—*Being Bullied; Feeling Left Out; Making Friends; Playing the Game*. Hauppauge, NY: Barron.

Other Publications in this Series

You, Your Child, and Positive Discipline, EC 1452, by Sue Doescher and Linda Burt (Oregon State University, Corvallis, 1995). 50¢

You, Your Child, and Self-confidence, EC 1453, by Sue Doescher and Linda Burt (Oregon State University, Corvallis, 1995). 50¢

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Helping Children Grow: Managing Sibling Rivalry, EC 1316 (Oregon State University, Corvallis, 1993). No charge.

Helping Children Grow: Developing Social Skills, EC 1317 (Oregon State University, Corvallis, 1993). No charge.

Helping Children Grow: Encouraging Competence, EC 1321 (Oregon State University, Corvallis, 1993). No charge.

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