



# Teaching Children to Problem Solve

## Can you teach children how to problem solve?

*What we know...*

Problem Solving is a difficult task, even for adults. When faced with problem situations, children (and adults) find it challenging to think about different ways to solve the problem. Research has demonstrated that children can be taught how to problem solve (Shure & Spivack, 1980, 1982; Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1997).

*What we need to teach...*

Children need to learn problem solving steps, they need to be able to think of alternative solutions to one problem and learn that all of their solutions have consequences that affect themselves and others involved in the situation.

## The Pyramid Model: A Place to Begin

Problem Solving Skills fall under the Targeted Social Emotional Support tier of the Pyramid. In this prevention level of the Pyramid, skills taught include Friendship Skills, Emotional Literacy, Anger Management/Impulse Control and Problem Solving.

Before teaching the problems solving steps, children need to be able to understand:

- Friendship Skills - taking turns, sharing, waiting your turn etc.
- Emotional Literacy Skills - being able to recognize, describe and understand feeling in themselves and others
- Anger Management/Impulse Control - understand that feelings can be expressed in appropriate ways and the child can calm down or slow down)



Team Tennessee  
Project B.A.S.I.C.  
Pyramid Model

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The following flyer discusses how to teach children four problem solving steps and strategies to consider when encouraging children to solve their own problems.

## Step 1: Identify the Problem

- *Why do we need to teach children to identify the problem?*

The first thing to teach children is not to identify the problem, but to identify the emotions involved. Children need to be taught to pay attention to their feelings, by realizing they are having a negative feeling, it can be a cue that they have a problem.

- *How do we teach children to identify their problem?*

Once children realizes they have a problem, they should be able to describe the problem. Teach children to reframe the problem into an "I" statement. By framing the problem with an "I" statement, a child takes ownership of the problem and not making it someone else's problem - "They won't let me play" verses "I want to play with them".

This helps them come up with more solutions in the next step, solutions that can be tried out by the child with the problem. Model for children "I" statements for them to hear them in action.



## Step 2: Think of Solutions

Think, think, think of some solutions



- *Why do we need to teach children to think of a lot of solutions?*

Many times the first solutions doesn't work, by having the child think of many solutions for a problem, they can then decide which one might work the best, which one everyone can agree on and which one might not be fair or work might not work at all.

- *How do we teach children to come up with many solutions for one problem?*

Teach children what a solution means, encouraging them to come up with solutions for a class problem. To start children will need to be taught multiple solutions for common problems: *Get a teacher; Ask nicely; Ignore; Play; Say, "Please stop"; Say, "Please"; Share; Trade; Wait and take turns, Walk away; Apologize; Play a game to decide; Do something to cool down; Talk it out; Play something else*

The goal is to generate as many solutions as possible not to think of one that will work best.

## Solution Kit Cards



The Pyramid Model materials contain Solution Kit Cards, visuals of 14 different solutions that can help solve common problems. The cards are in 2 sets: Toddler- PreK and PreK-2nd grade. The Solution Kit Cue Cards help children begin to think of solutions to problems that might arise in the classroom. The children need to be taught each solution and times when it would work or not work. The cue cards can be posted on a bulletin board, or placed into a lunch box, backpack, or plastic case for children to take out and use when a problem arises.

### Activities with Solution Cards -

- "Problematize" activities throughout the day and have children generate solutions - "We have 2 calculators and 5 children who need to use it, what can we do?" See how many solutions the children can come up with.
- "What would you do?" The teacher creates several problems to be solved and the children write or discuss as many solutions to the problems as possible, children can use Solution Kit Cards as starting point.
- Have children make their own Solution Kit Cards.
- Look for places in children's stories where characters need help solving problems.



## Step 3: Consider Consequences

- *Why do we need to teach children consider the consequences?*

Some solutions work for everyone, others may benefit one child over another and some solutions might not be safe. All solutions have consequences. Children need to be taught to look at the full picture and ask themselves: Is it safe? Is it fair? How would everyone feel? By thinking of these questions they can decide which are the best solutions to try.

- *How do we teach children to think about what would happen if?*

Teach children what consequence means - every action will result in a reaction.

Using the above questions, have children take a list of generated solutions from a classroom problem scenario and have the children determine if they can decide which solutions would be safe, fair and make everyone involved feel okay. Using puppets, the teacher can role play the negative solutions and ask the children to think about the questions from a different point of view.



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## Step 4: Try It Out!

Give it a try!



TRY IT OUT!

Once children have completed the first three steps, they are ready to try out their selected solution(s). Have the children think about which solution would have the positive consequences decided on in step 3 and then let them give it a try.

Reminded them that not all their solutions are going to work, that's why we came up with a bunch! They might have to try another solution, multiple solutions or go all the way back to Step 2 and think of more solutions. Sometimes the problem still might not be solved and it might be time to walk away or get help from an adult.

### Important!

Children will not attempt to use problem solving skills unless they have seen it modeled, a teacher encourages using skills and helps children navigate through the steps in actual situations and gives specific praise to children giving it a try.

# Dealing with Common Peer Problems

What are the common peer problems you see in your classroom? Do you have a plan to deal with these behaviors?

Create scenarios around these problems: Being teased, bullied, yelled at, or excluded from an activity

Teaching alternative responses (solutions!):

- Teaching children to speak up when something is bothering them, "please stop"
- Teaching children to be good ignorers or when to walk away
- Teaching the aggressor skills to initiate play and to understand empathy
- Teaching when it is appropriate to ask an adult for help

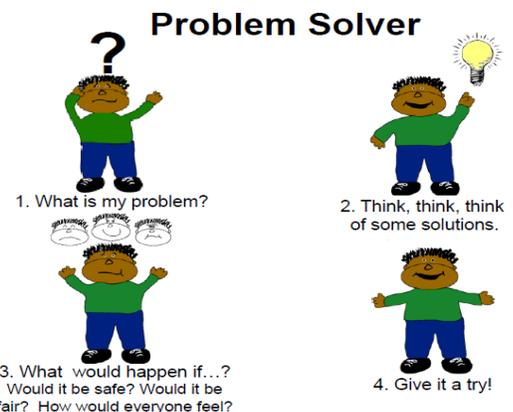
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## Enhance Your Teaching: What can I do to encourage problem solving ?

There are five steps to enhance problem solving skills in the moment for children:

1. **Anticipate** - Expect problems to occur in your classroom. Plan ahead, when teachers anticipate problems, they are available to support children to problem solve.
2. **Proximity** - Be close to where the problem might occur, not to prevent the problem from occurring but to be close to prompt children through problem solving steps and to help them calm down if necessary before problem solving begins.
3. **Support** - Prompt children through problem solving, remind them of steps and keep the children actively in the problem solving process. Children unsure of the process will leave or give up without adult support. Prompting can be done verbally or encouraging use of visuals including Solution Kit Cards (and Problem Solver card to the right).
4. **Encourage** - Good solutions don't always work, children need to be encouraged to keep generating or trying other solutions. Be a cheerleader, encourage the child that keeps trying solutions and prompt them to use Solution Kit Cards.
5. **Promote** - Support "in the moment" problem solving to reinforce success. This can be done informally, teachers can give children high-fives, thumbs-up, a wink, verbal acknowledgement of positive behavior, hugs, and so on. Or formally, teachers can plan mini-celebrations when a child has done a great job of problem solving. These mini-celebrations send a clear message to all of the children in the class that peaceful persistence at problem solving is valued.

When teachers focus on promoting problem solving children will begin supporting, encouraging, practicing and promoting each others problem solving. They will seek out Solution Kit Cards when problems arise in the classroom.



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Promoting Social Emotional Competence  
in Tennessee's Young Children

