

## Helping your Child to Problem Solve

Learning to solve problems peacefully and get along with others involves many social and emotional skills. Conflicts are a normal part of life and occur when people have different sets of needs or believe their needs are not being met. This can lead to disagreement, but it does not need to involve a fight.

Managing conflict peacefully is about creating an atmosphere where violence, coercion, disengagement, fear and aggression are not likely to occur. Instead, skills like empathy, problem solving, listening to and understanding other points of view are used to come up with strategies to make things right in a fair way.

These strategies will differ as children grow. The brain changes and develops and so does a child's approach to conflict and their ability to empathise and negotiate. A child who has these qualities is usually able to create a safe atmosphere by putting themselves in another's shoes and by managing their emotions. They are more likely to be able to problem solve peacefully and show respect for others. Children who can negotiate and show empathy can be kind, they can listen and not laugh at another's discomfort or bully.

Children learn their conflict resolution skills at home. Children and adolescents who feel secure in their relationships with their caregiver or parents are more confident, more able to deal with stress and become involved in fewer problem behaviours at school. They are also more able to stand their ground and say 'No' to friends when being encouraged to do things that are not safe or right. Children who are better able to solve problems and get along with others generate a positive atmosphere. People like to be with them. Ultimately they become more independent and confident about going out into the world and making it on their own.

On the other hand, children who lack these skills are more likely to act in an aggressive way to get their needs met; like getting into fights, being mean or making fun of others. These children often struggle to show compassion to others and learn to read hostility into a situation where there is none. These children are, as a result, often more stressed and at increased risk of low self-esteem, depression and anxiety.

So, what can you do?

First and foremost model problem solving skills at home. Speak openly about difficult situations that you might have encountered and how you solved them. (Remember to be mindful of using age appropriate examples.)

When your child has a problem, brainstorm possible solutions with them. Help them to process and evaluate options by giving them space to think and without jumping in to tell them what they should do. As they generate ideas and possible solutions help them to consider possible outcomes. Providing your children with positives support through this process teaches them that problem solving is a skill that requires ongoing practice. For older children and teenagers it is also useful to help them to reflect back on the process.

Help your child to see that difficulties with solving problems are learning opportunities and that there can be some trial and error involved. Don't be afraid to say "Well, that didn't work. What else can you try?"

Teach your children that it's OK to be wrong and to make mistakes. We all do. Help them to take ownership of their mistakes, how to apologise with sincerity and that it's never too late. Importantly, encourage them to try again to solve the problem in a way that leads to a higher level of competence.

Some of the following may help:-

- Learn about and practice mindfulness and teach and encourage your children to do the same. This practice helps to calm the reactive part of the brain and to strengthen the thinking/problem-solving part of the brain.
- Learn about the developing brain and how it works and share your discoveries with your children.
- Try a problem solving model e.g. ABCD Ask what the problem is, Brainstorm some solutions, Choose a solution to try , Do it!
- For younger children, play "feeling" charades.
- Read books. There are heaps of excellent children's stories available which deal with managing feelings and emotions.
- Role play difficult conversations and conflict scenarios. Allow your children to practice with you what they are planning to say. This is also a good time to teach skills such as "I" messages.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if there is any way we can assist you or your children at school.

Andrea and Gai.