

Early Years Team

How to help children begin to solve problems and negotiate with each other.

Problem-solving is a key part of early years development and can support learning across all areas of development. The skill of problem-solving starts developing very early in a child's life and stems from the knowledge of the world that they are constantly building. For example, a baby may cry when hungry as they know that crying gets the attention of an adult who can feed them.

Adults can help a child to begin to resolve conflicts peacefully by teaching negotiation, compromise, and problem-solving strategies and by encouraging them to express their wants and feelings.

Children learn by example, so it is important to model your own problem-solving skills by speaking aloud. For example, when faced with a problem, verbalise your own thinking by saying: "I wonder why this isn't working?" Maybe if I try ..." This helps children understand that thinking is a process and there are stages that they can work through to reach a solution.

Using a script can be a useful way of teaching children how to problem solve together. When used consistently, it will help children to recognise and label their own feelings and seek solutions:

Step 1. Identify the problem

Invite the child to say what they think the problem is. Summarise what they have told you e.g. 'I see John you are telling me that you were playing with the teddy and Jane you wanted a turn so you snatched it from him have I got that right?'

Step 2. Label feelings the child is/children are experiencing

e.g. 'Jack, I can see you are cross because you want the teddy back and Jovita, I can see you are cross about giving the teddy back'

Step 3. 'Brainstorm' solutions

Invite the children to make suggestions about how to solve the problem. If necessary, you can give suggestions. For example, "Could we find another one/a similar toy, so you both have one? Could we take turns/use a timer to take turns fairly?"

Step 4. Agree on what solution to try

Encourage the children to decide what to try or suggest which solution they are going to try first. Agree on how it is going to work; who will go first, who has which toy, how to take turns etc.

Step 5. Evaluate the solution

Invite the children to say whether the problem was resolved by asking, "How did that work?" "Do we need try some of the other ways we thought of?"

Allow for mistakes

Make sure that children feel safe to express their ideas and make mistakes. This is crucial if children are to learn that mistakes are ok and part of the learning process. (A 'fear of failure' could hold them back in future).

Praise efforts whether outcomes are successful or not. For example, "Well Jack, I noticed you found it difficult to wait for the timer to finish before taking your turn, but what is great is that you did let Jane have a turn. Next time, maybe we can use a different timer, so you are able to wait for the timer to end before taking your turn."