Rachel Bailey's Parenting Academy

HOW TO TEACH KIDS TO SOLVE PROBLEMS

Improve kids' problem-solving skills to improve their behavior, confidence...and even their relationships with others!

SOLVING PROBLEMS - The Background

Why We Have to Teach This Tool

Kids are not born problem-solvers. In fact, most kids don't even recognize problems, let alone know how to solve them. If three siblings all want to use one iPad, they're not thinking, "Hmm, there are three of us and one iPad… that's a problem." Instead, they're thinking, "I want that iPad so I'll take it."

If they can't even identify problems, they certainly don't know how to solve them. Often, we tell kids, "I know you can solve this problem." But can they? Kids don't naturally possess problem-solving skills or conflict resolution skills. (Heck, many adults don't have those!) And we adults are solving their problems for them all the time. They're cold? You tell them to put on a jacket. They're hungry? You tell them the snacks are in the cupboard (or you give them a snack yourself).

That's why they have trouble with

Knowing how to deal with siblings or friends who have different opinions; knowing what to say if they have to talk to a teachers; expressing their feelings instead of acting out…

But, they still have to solve problems — on a daily basis!

The good news is that if we teach them how to solve problems, they can improve their relationships with others, take more healthy risks, and feel so much more confident in their own abilities.

SOLVING PROBLEMS - The Background

How We Teach This

We can teach kids to solve problems every day.

One of the phrases I've used in my house as my kids were growing up is that "We do solutions, not complaints." Say this genuinely – not sarcastically or angrily, which we're all tempted to do – and kids really do start to focus on solutions... If for no other reason than they get tired of hearing that phrase!

So we can...

Use Everyday Situations to Teach Kids How to Solve Problems

Instead of solving problems *for* them, we can ask them questions that gets them to think about solutions. We can teach them to solve those problems, and we can practice this skill with them until it becomes natural to them.

This doesn't actually take long, and it really does result in less fighting and more confidence in the home!

SOLVING PROBLEMS – What Doesn't Work

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EXAMPLES OF WHAT WE USUALLY DO THAT DOESN'T WORK

Julia is fighting with her brother Thomas. Her mom tells them to work it out. They continue fighting until she feels like she has to punish both of them.

The problem: Julia and Thomas don't instinctively know how to see their sibling's perspective and identify compromises.

The solution: Julia and Thomas's mom can help them each understand the other child's point of view. She can teach them a solution that takes each of their perspectives into account.

Stephen is getting in trouble at school for talking. Stephen's dad takes away his electronics privileges, but Stephen continues talking at school and getting in trouble.

The problem: Stephen is likely talking at school because he's bored. But he probably doesn't know what the problem IS, let alone how to solve it.

The solution: Stephen and his dad can discuss what is motivating the talking. Then they can brainstorm other ways for Stephen to deal with his boredom in the class.

YOUR TURN!

What is a behavior that your child does that frustrates you?

How do you respond?

The problem:*(Do you/your child know what's causing the behavior? Do you/your child know how to solve that problem?)*

The solution:

On the next few pages, you'll see suggestions that will teach you how to improve your child's problem-solving skills on a daily basis!

SOLVING PROBLEMS - Examples

How to Teach Kids To Solve Problems

Ask: "What do you need?"

We are so used to solving problems for our kids that it comes naturally to us. But we can start to teach them to solve problems at about age 3 with a simple question, "What do you need?"
Let's say your kids are sitting in the back seat of the car and one says, "The music is too loud!" Ask them (without sarcasm), "What do you need?"

It sounds like a simple question, but that question forces them *to identify what they* need and *figure out how to ask for it* — an incredibly important tool when solving problems. In this case, when you say, "What do you need?" they'll answer, "Can you turn the music down?" And the truth is that they eventually become sick of you asking the question "What do you need" and just learn how to ask for what they need in the first place!

This question will help them solve the problem when they don't know how to ask a teacher for help, or when they're dealing with a peer or friend who's not being respectful — because they'll know how to *figure out what they need and how to ask for it.*

Say: "Here's what I'd do… What would work for you?"

I mentioned earlier that one motto in our house is "We don't do complains; we do solutions." Often when you ask your child, "What's the solution?" they say, "I don't know" — because they genuinely don't know! It's important that we empower kids to find solutions without giving them solutions.

SOLVING PROBLEMS - Examples

One way to do that is to say, "I'll tell you what I'd do in that situation… But can you tell me if you'd need to change anything to make that solution work for you?"

So if they say, "My friend Georgia keeps talking to me in class, and I keep getting in trouble for it!" and they tell you they don't know the solution, you could say, "Well I know what I'd do. I'd ask the teacher to move me away from Georgia's desk so that can't happen. But I'm not in your shoes. Would that work for you? Or do you need to do something completely different?"

Teach the language of solutions

Another way to teach kids to solve problems is to teach them what it sounds like to solve problems. Often kids can't think of solutions because they aren't sure where to start. If you can break it down for them, it seems less overwhelming. One way to do that is to teach them: "Solutions usually start with 'Can I please…' or 'Can you please…?'

Let's say your daughter is struggling with a coach on her sports team. You don't necessarily want to step in (remember, you're helping her solve problems now!), but she doesn't know how to handle it. You can remind her that "Solutions usually start with 'Can I please…' or 'Can you please…?,'" which is likely to reduce her overwhelm as she now knows she can begin with "Can I please talk to you about how I'm feeling?"

SOLVING PROBLEMS - Examples

Ask them to solve your problems

Kids need practice solving problems. The more they do it, the more confident they will become. And, as we all know, kids love to tell us what to do.

To help them practice solving problems, you can come up with problems for them to solve for you. You might say something like, "Shoot, I scheduled two things at the same time tomorrow. I can't be in two places at once. How should I solve this?" At the dinner table you can ask them to solve problems (real or made up) that you faced that day that you'd like their "advice" about.

The problem doesn't have to be one they would actually face... Solving any type of problem helps them build their problem-solving skills and muscles!

Teach them to solve issues that keep coming up

When kids are not doing what we want them to (they're not doing homework when they're supposed to, they keep dropping their stuff all over the house), we think we need to find the right "punishment" to get them to act differently.

But kids as old as 4 years old can be involved in plans for solving problems that keep coming up. After you set a boundary ("When you get home from school, your bag needs to go on the hook and your shoes in the bin,") you can say, "I've noticed that that's not been happening. What's going on for you in those situations?" Then listen to their perspective, because that will help both of you and them solve the problem because you'll understand what tool they are missing.

SOLVING PROBLEMS - Examples

Then you can ask "what do you need in order to make sure these tasks get done?" Especially if they've been practicing problem-solving, often kids will come up with plans to solve "behavior problems" that we never would have thought of!

As an additional bonus, kids can also come up the solution if their plan isn't working (another problem). So you could say, "OK, I love your plan for how you'll put your bag and shoes away. What do you want me to do if you don't follow that plan one day?" Not only does this teach kids to solve problems, but it gives them a sense of control (which is more likely to lead to good behavior) AND it forces them to think about what steps need to be taken in order to act responsible. Often kids aren't thinking about any of this because we're solving the problems for them!

Celebrate problem solving

One of the most successful ways I've motivated my own kids to solve problems is to make a big deal when any of us solve problems. Our ritual (which we started when the kids were about 2 1/2) is that when someone solves a problem, we us their initials and then the letters "PS," which stands for "problem solver." So if I solved a problem, my kids would point to me and say, "RBPS!" Or if my daughter Emily solved a problem we'd say "EBPS!" This type of positive recognition makes them WANT to solve problems... so when we ask them to do that at other times, there is already a positive association with problem solving in their minds.

Older kids may not want to use this "initials" ritual but treating older kids with respect when they solve problems does the trick as well: "Wow, I wouldn't have come up with that solution. That was a good one."

SOLVING PROBLEMS - What Will You Do?

What is a behavior in your child you'd like to change?

What is one thing you can ask them to help them solve that "problem" (that they want to do something that they're not supposed to do)?

What two strategies will you use to help them learn to solve problems every day?