STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING POSITIVE BEHAVIORS: Supporting Problem-Solving Skills

WHAT IT IS:
Supporting Children’s Problem-Solving Skills is teaching children specific steps to resolve disagreements and conflicts. This strategy teaches children to recognize a problem, come up with a set of solutions, understand the consequences of choosing each solution, mutually agree on a solution, and then give the solution a try. This strategy is adapted from the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL)’s Problem-Solving Steps and Solution Kit.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE:
Ann and Sadie are fighting over a dress in the dramatic play area. The teacher approaches, kneels down to get on their level and asks them, “What are you feeling? What’s the problem?” The girls each explain that they are mad because they want to wear the same dress. The teacher says, “Well, we have a problem and now we need a solution, let’s look at our Solution Kit cards (cue cards with potential solutions to problems) to help us come up with ideas!” The girls review the cards and brainstorm they could (1) Ignore (2) Take Turns or (3) Ask Nicely. Ann suggests she could “Ask Nicely” and then Sadie could give her the dress. The teacher prompts her to consider, “Is the solution safe? Is the solution fair? How would everyone feel?” Ann says that the solution is not fair to Sadie and Sadie may feel sad. Sadie suggests they can take turns with the dress. The children decide the solution is safe, fair, and makes them both happy. The teacher says, “I am proud of you both for problem-solving! You found a solution to your problem!”

WHY IT WORKS:
Supporting Problem-Solving Skills is effective because the teacher is empowering children to solve their own problems. Young children are still learning to take the perspective of another person and need assistance to understand how their actions impact others. Thus, a child is not likely to think about how taking a toy from a child would make that child mad or sad. When a problem arises among children, the teacher can use these techniques to help children identify the problem, take the other child’s perspective, come up with and implement a solution.

WHEN IT MAY BE USED:
Supporting Problem-Solving Skills helps to stop problems before they escalate and will alleviate negative events in the classroom. It can be used to help an individual child who is having trouble negotiating with other children. It is also a wonderful strategy to use classroom-wide so that all children learn how to independently and effectively resolve disagreements.
WHAT ARE THE STEPS/TO-DO’S:


**Prepare children to handle problems.**
- Present possible scenarios/problems and encourage children to come up with solutions.
  - For example, “We have a new computer game to play with today during Center Time. *What can you do if someone is using the computer and you want a turn?*” Or “These two puppets both want the same toy. How can they solve their problem?”
  - As students generate possible solutions, ask them to consider, “Is the solution safe? Is the solution fair? How would everyone feel?”
- Select books where there is a problem and have the children solve it.
  - Pause during reading and encourage children to generate possible solutions to the problems faced by the characters. Then ask them to consider, “Is the solution safe? Is the solution fair? How would everyone feel?”
- Introduce the CSEFEL Solution Kit cards (picture cards with possible solutions, such as “Get a Timer”, “Ask Nicely”, “Take Turns”).
  - Role-play using the cards to solve problems (before problems occur).
  - Make the cards accessible to children (for example, in a folder at eye level).

**When problems occur, scaffold children’s problem-solving skills.**

1. Help children recognize and describe the problem.
   - Encourage children to discuss what they are feeling (for example, anger, frustration, sadness).
   - Help define the problem in neutral terms (state each child’s perspective). “I see that Olive wants a turn on the bike, but Michael isn’t finished using it.”
   - If children are too upset to discuss, encourage them to use calm-down breathing techniques (see Supporting Emotion Regulation LOOK strategy sheet for further details). If they are in a full-blown tantrum it is best to wait for them to be calm before discussing possible solutions.
2. Encourage children to think of potential solutions.
   - Use the CSEFEL Solution Kit cards to generate solutions.
   - Prompt children to come up with their own possible solutions.
   - Don’t focus on what will work best, but rather generate as many possible solutions as possible.
3. Discuss consequences of possible solutions: Is the solution safe? Is the solution fair? How would everyone feel?
4. Have children agree on which solution to try.
5. Have children try out their chosen solution.
   - If it doesn’t work, have children try out another one of the solutions they generated.

- Remember to scaffold, not direct, the problem-solving process. As much as possible, encourage the children to think up solutions and choose what they want instead of solving the problem for them. This way, you are teaching children to problem-solve on their own—also, they will feel better about what they have chosen.