

Problem solving

Your child will face many challenges as they grow, whether it is starting school, joining a sporting team or going to their first sleepover. The ability to make decisions and solve problems develops as your child learns to cope with daily challenges. Young children are not expected to sort through every issue on their own, and it is likely that they will require lots of guidance from their family. The good news is encouraging your child to take part in problem solving will help them develop this skill over time.

The following steps are a useful guide to teaching your child about problem solving. Encourage your child to take part so that they can slowly learn to do it for themselves.

Remember, it is best to begin when your child is feeling calm and relaxed. Start with an issue where you know they are likely to experience some success. If your child is very anxious or angry, help them to calm down first (eg having some quiet time, taking some deep breaths) or leave problem solving for another day or another issue when you know your child is ready to participate.



1 Identify the problem

This step can be difficult as children do not always have the words to tell you how they feel or know exactly what the problem is. Finding a quiet space where your child feels comfortable and relaxed may help them to start talking about it. Using your active listening skills will also help your child to feel understood and supported in talking to you. (For more information, see the Starting School *Understanding behaviour* information sheet.) Your child will benefit from your help in trying to understand what might be happening, particularly when they are having difficulty identifying the problem. Remember to step back and not jump in to solving the problems for your child at this stage.

2 Find solutions and try them out

Once you have a better sense of what the problem is, you may like to generate some solutions with your child. Brainstorming two or three solutions is a good place to start as any more may seem overwhelming for a young child. They may not yet be able to generate their own solutions, but you can encourage their thinking with questions such as “what do you think you/we could do?” With practice and support from others, your child will gradually be able to come up with more of their own solutions. However, you may need to make some suggestions in the beginning.

Once you and your child have identified some options, you can decide together which one to try first. Work out a plan for how they will try out their solution. Do they need support from you, another child or a teacher? When will they get a chance to try it out? (eg at home or in the school playground.)

3 Check in: how did it go?

Once your child has tried the solution, check in with your child as soon as possible. Did it work? If not, why not? What could your child try next? Remember to give your child lots of support and encouragement if the solution didn't work out. Sometimes we have the right solution, but need to practise it many times. Other times, we may need to return to step one to see if the issue was correctly identified.

You can help to support your child's problem solving skills

- Model your own problem solving. Next time a daily problem arises (eg losing your car keys) talk through the problem and solution out loud. This will help to show your child that everyone has problems and that we can work through them by coming up with different solutions.
- Encourage your child to utilise support people to assist them with problem solving. These could be family members, friends, educators and teachers. This will promote help-seeking behaviours in your child and enable them to feel supported when they have a problem.

Learning to negotiate solutions to everyday problems and make decisions for themselves will help your child to gradually become more independent and responsible. It also helps them feel confident and good about themselves, which is an important part of mental health and wellbeing. When their mental health is supported, children are better learners, have stronger relationships and are better able to meet life's challenges.

For more information

If you would like more information, KidsMatter has produced a range of resources to support your child through early childhood and primary school. The following information sheets related to this topic are available online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au/families/information-sheets

KidsMatter Early Childhood information sheets:

- *Helping young kids to choose wisely*
- *Learning to make good decisions and solve problems*
- *Decision-making skills: Suggestions for families and staff*

KidsMatter Primary information sheets:

- *Helping kids to choose wisely*
- *Decision-making skills: Suggestions for families*



This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Starting School information sheets for families. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au/startingschool