**How to Teach Problem-Solving Skills to Children and Preteens**

**Source-** biglifejournal.com (The website was created by parents to help children who are in a negative situation. It helps kids develop a resilient growth mindset so they can face life's challenges with confidence)

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**W**hether it’s a toy-related conflict, a tough math equation, or negative peer pressure, kids of ALL ages face problems and challenges on a daily basis.

As parents or teachers, we can’t always be there to solve every problem for our children. In fact, this isn’t our job. Our job is to TEACH our children how to solve problems by themselves. This way, they can become confident, independent, and successful individuals.

Instead of giving up or getting frustrated when they encounter a challenge, kids with problem-solving skills manage their emotions, think creatively, and persist until they find a solution. Naturally, these abilities go hand-in-hand with a growth mindset.

**So HOW do you teach problem-solving skills to kids?**

Well, it depends on their age. As cognitive abilities and the size of the child’s challenges grow/evolve over time, so should your approach to teaching problem-solving skills.

Read on to learn key strategies for teaching problem-solving to kids, as well as some age-by-age ideas and activities.

**3 General Strategies to Teach Problem-Solving at Any Age**

**1. Model Effective Problem-Solving**

When YOU encounter a challenge, do a “think-aloud” for the benefit of your child. MODEL how to apply the same problem-solving skills you’ve been working on together, giving the real-world examples that she can implement in her own life.

At the same time, show your child a willingness to make mistakes. Everyone encounters problems, and that’s okay. Sometimes the first solution you try won’t work, and that’s okay too!

When you model problem-solving, explain that there are some things that are out of our control. As we're solving a problem at hand we should focus on the things we CAN actually control.

**2. Ask for Advice**

Ask your kids for advice when you have a problem. This teaches them that it’s common to make mistakes and face challenges. It also gives them the opportunity to practice problem-solving skills.

Plus, when you indicate that their ideas are valued, they’ll gain the confidence to attempt solving problems on their own.

**3. Don’t Provide “The Answer”**

As difficult as it may be, allow your child to struggle, sometimes fail, and ultimately LEARN from experiencing consequences.

Now, let’s take a look at some age-specific strategies and activities. The ages listed below are general guidelines, feel free to choose any strategies or activities that you feel will work for YOUR child.

**3-5 Years**

* **Use Emotion Coaching**

To step into a problem-solving mindset, young children need to first learn to manage their emotions. After all, it’s difficult for a small child to logically consider solutions to a problem if he’s mid-tantrum.

**First**, teach your kids that ALL emotions are acceptable. There are NO “bad” emotions. Even seemingly negative emotions like anger, sadness, and frustration can teach us valuable lessons. What matters is how we respond to these emotions.

**Second,** follow this process:

**Step One:** Naming and validating emotions. When your child is upset, help her process the way she’s feeling. Say something like, “I understand that you’re upset because Jessica is playing with the toy you wanted.”

**Step Two:** Processing emotions. Guide your child to her calming space. If she doesn't have one, it's a good idea to create one. Let her calm her body and process her emotions so she can problem-solve, learn, and grow.

**Step Three:** Problem Solving. Brainstorm solutions with your child, doing more LISTENING than talking during the conversation. This allows your child to practice her problem-solving skills, and she’s more likely to actually implement the solutions she came up with herself.

Say, “Show Me the Hard Part”This helps your child identify the ROOT of the problem, making it less intimidating and easier to solve.

Repeat back what your child says, “So you’re saying…”

Once you both understand the real problem, prompt your child to come up with solutions. “There must be some way you can fix that…” or “There must be something you can do…”

Now that your child has identified “the hard part,” she’ll likely be able to come up with a solution. If not, help her brainstorm some ideas. You may try asking the question, “If you DID know, what would you think?” and see what she comes up with.

* **Problem-Solve with Creative Play**

Allow your child to choose activities and games based on her interests. Free play provides plenty of opportunities to navigate and creatively solve problems.

Children often learn best through play. Playing with items like blocks, simple puzzles, and dress-up clothes can teach your child the process of problem-solving.

Even while playing, your child thinks critically: Where does this puzzle piece fit? What does this do? I want to dress up as a queen. What should I wear? Where did I put my tiara? Is it under the couch?

* **Problem-Solve with Storybooks**

Read age-appropriate stories featuring characters who experience problems, such as:

**Ladybug Girl and Bumblebee Boy by Jacky Davis:** The story of two friends who want to play together but can’t find a game to agree on. After taking turns making suggestions, they arrive at a game they both want to play: Ladybug Girl and Bumblebee Boy.

**The Curious George Series by Margaret and H.E. Rey:** A curious little monkey gets into and out of dilemmas, teaching kids to find solutions to problems of their own.

**Ira Sleeps Over by Bernard Waber:** Ira’s thrilled to have a sleepover at his friend Reggie’s house. But there’s one problem: Should he or should he not bring his teddy bear? It may seem small, but this is the type of early social problem your child might relate to.

Connect these experiences to similar events in your child’s own life, and ASK your child HOW the characters in these stories could solve their problems. Encourage a variety of solutions, and discuss the possible outcomes of each.

This is a form of dialogue reading, or actively ENGAGING your child in the reading experience. Interacting with the text instead of passively listening can “turbocharge” the development of literacy skills such as comprehension in preschool-aged children.

By asking questions about the characters’ challenges, you can also give your child’s problem-solving abilities a boost.

You can even have your child role-play the problem and potential solutions to reinforce the lesson.

**5-7 Years**

* **Teach the Problem-Solving Steps**

Come up with a simple problem-solving process for your child, one that you can consistently implement. For example, you might try the following five steps:

**Step 1:** What am I feeling? Help your child understand what she’s feeling in the moment (frustration, anger, curiosity, disappointment, excitement, etc.) Noticing and naming emotions will diffuse their charge and give your child a chance to take a step back.

**Step 2:** What’s the problem? Guide your child to identify the specific problem. In most cases, help her take responsibility for what happened rather than pointing fingers. For instance, instead of, “Joey got me in trouble at recess,” your child might say, “I got in trouble at recess for arguing with Joey.”

**Step 3:** What are the solutions? Encourage your child to come up with as many solutions as possible. At this point, they don’t even need to be “good” solutions. They’re just brainstorming here, not yet evaluating the ideas they’ve generated.

**Step 4:** What would happen if…? What would happen if your child attempted each of these solutions? Is the solution safe and fair? How will it make others feel? You can also try role-playing at this step. It’s important for your child to consider BOTH positive and negative consequences of her actions.

**Step 5:** Which one will I try? Ask your child to pick one or more solutions to try. If the solution didn't work, discuss WHY and move on to another one. Encourage your child to keep trying until the problem is solved.

Consistently practice these steps so that they become second nature, and model solving problems of your own the same way. It's a good idea to reflect: What worked? What didn’t? What can you do differently next time?

* **Problem-Solve with Craft Materials**

Crafting is another form of play that can teach kids to solve problems creatively.

Provide your child with markers, modeling clay, cardboard boxes, tape, paper, etc. They’ll come up with all sorts of interesting creations and inventive games with these simple materials.

These “open-ended toys” don’t have a “right way to play,” allowing your child to get creative and generate ideas independently.

* **Ask Open-Ended Questions**

Asking open-ended questions improves a child’s ability to think critically and creatively, ultimately making them better problem-solvers. Examples of open-ended questions include:

How could we work together to solve this?

How did you work it out? or How do you know that?

Tell me about what you built, made, or created.

What do you think will happen next?

What do you think would happen if…?

What did you learn?

What was easy? What was hard?

What would you do differently next time?

Open-ended questions have no right answer and can’t be answered with a simple “Yes” or “No.”

You can ask open-ended questions even when your child isn’t currently solving a problem to help her practice her thinking skills, which will come in handy when she does have a problem to solve.

**7-9 Years**

* **Break Down Problems into Chunks**

This strategy is a more advanced version of “Show me the hard part.”

The bigger your child gets, the bigger her problems get too. When your child is facing a challenge that seems overwhelming or insurmountable, encourage her to break it into smaller, more manageable chunks.

For instance, let’s say your child has a poor grade in history class. Why is the grade so low? What are the causes of this problem?

As usual, LISTEN as your child brainstorms, asking open-ended questions to help if she gets stuck.

If the low grade is the result of missing assignments, perhaps your child can make a list of these assignments and tackle them one at a time. Or if tests are the issue, what’s causing your child to struggle on exams?

Perhaps she’s distracted by friends in the class, has trouble asking for help, and doesn’t spend enough time studying at home. Once you’ve identified these “chunks,” help your child tackle them one at a time until the problem is solved.

Sometimes, your child might feel “stuck” when facing problems. They may stop and ask for help before even attempting to find a solution. Encourage your child to embrace challenges and work through problems instead.

**9-11 Years**

* **Problem-Solve with Prompts**

Provide your child or a group of children with materials such as straws, cotton balls, yarn, clothespins, tape, paper clips, sticky notes, Popsicle sticks, etc.

With just these materials, challenge your kids to solve unusual problems like:

* Make a leprechaun trap
* Create a jump ramp for cars
* Design your own game with rules
* Make a device for two people to communicate with one another
* This is a fun way to practice critical thinking and creative problem-solving. Most likely, it will take multiple attempts to find a solution that works, which can apply to just about any aspect of life.
* **Make Them Work for It**

When your child asks for a new toy, technology, or clothes, have her make a plan to obtain the desired item herself. Not only will your child have to brainstorm and evaluate solutions, but she’ll also gain confidence.

Ask your child HOW she can earn the money for the item that she wants, and encourage her as she works toward her goal.

* **Put It on Paper**

Have your child write out their problems on paper and brainstorm some potential solutions.

But now, she takes this process a step further: After attempting each solution, which succeeded? Which were unsuccessful? Why?

This helps your child reflect on various outcomes, learning what works and what doesn’t. The lessons she learns here will be useful when she encounters similar problems in the future.

**Ages 12+**

* **Play Chess Together**

Learning to play chess is a great way for kids to learn problem-solving AND build their brains at the same time. It requires players to use critical thinking, creativity, analysis of the board, recognize patterns, and more. There are online versions of the game, books on how to play, videos, and other resources. Don’t know how to play? Learn with your teen to connect and problem solve together!

* **Have Them Learn To Code**

Our teens and tweens are already tech-savvy and can use their skills to solve problems by learning to code. Coding promotes creativity, logic, planning, and persistence. There are many great tools and online or in-person programs that can boost your child’s coding skills.

* **Encourage to Start a Meaningful Project**

This project has to be meaningful to your teen, for example starting a YouTube channel. Your teen will practice problem-solving skills as they’re figuring out how to grow their audience, how to have their videos discovered, and much more.

* **Apply the SODAS Method**

Looking for a game plan that your teen can employ when faced with a problem? The SODAS method can be used for big or small problems. Just remember this simple acronym and follow these ideas:

1. Situation
2. Options
3. Disadvantages
4. Advantages
5. Solution
6. Encourage to Join Problem-Solving Groups

Does your teen enjoy solving problems in a team? Have them join a group or club that helps them hone their skills in a variety of settings--from science and robotics to debating and international affairs.