That's a Great Idea!
Teaching Kids to Problem Solve

by Karen Stephens

I was with four-year-old Angie. She had just arrived at child care, and already she was in tears. With a touch to her bangs, I tried to empathize with her apparent sadness. I sat beside her, offering a tissue. She turned away, crying louder. I suggested perhaps she was feeling sad about her mom leaving. Still crying, she said "No". Frustrated with my denseness, she blurted out she was upset about forgetting her teddy bear for nap.

Ah, progress. At least she'd identified the problem. That was a first step toward a solution. It turns out, Angie's household was in a rush that morning, and teddy was left behind. (Sound familiar?) She was none too pleased about this. She was frustrated and dreaded nap without her love-worn teddy. Once Angie unloaded all her feelings, (and a lot of tears), we could move onto resolution. Of course, I could have solved the problem pretty quickly on my own. I mean, I am the adult after all. But I'm big on making children responsible for their behavior.

When Angie fessed up that she couldn't bear to think of napping without her bear, I empathized by restating what I believed was the problem. "You're frustrated because you don't have your teddy bear for nap time." When she confirmed I was correct, Angie took the first step in the problem solving process — she identified the problem. I said, "Yes, you have a problem. How could you solve it?"

By asking, "How could you solve it?" I moved Angie on to the next step of problem solving, brainstorming possible solutions. Following are two solutions Angie brainstormed.

Solution number 1:
"Let's go out and get my Mom and tell her to bring my teddy bear to school."

Solution number 2:
"Let's call Mom on the telephone and tell her to bring my teddy bear."

To help her, I suggested a third possible solution. Number 3:
She could borrow one of the child care center's stuffed animals for today's nap and bring her own for tomorrow. After brainstorming each idea, I helped Angie evaluate how effective each would be. By asking calculated questions, I gradually guided her in deciding which solutions were workable:

Response to #1:
"You've been crying quite a while. Do you think your mom is still in the parking lot so we can catch her?" Angie's answer: "No."

Response to #2:
"We could call your mom, but are there telephones in college classrooms?" Answer: "I don't know." I told Angie I knew for sure there weren't telephones in college classrooms.

Angie's response to #3:
This was my suggestion to borrow one of the center's stuffed animals. Personally I thought it was a brilliant idea. Three guesses what Angie thought about it: "Noooooooooooooo!!!! I need my *blue* teddy bear!"

I was stumped. Three solutions suggested, three solutions shot down. Then Angie went back to the brainstorming step. She said, "I know. Let's write my mom a letter and tell her

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not to forget my teddy bear again." Hey, now we were talking! We went immediately to get paper and a pencil. Angie told me to write: "Mom, don't forget my teddy bear tomorrow." I wrote it, but it didn't sit well with me. I'm just a stickler about responsibility! It must really grate on children's nerves.

I asked Angie who wanted to sleep with the teddy bear at nap time. Her answer: "I do." I then asked, "Angie, if you are the one who needs the teddy, who should remember it tomorrow? Her UNenthusiastic response: "Me."

So we added the sentence, "Please help me remember my teddy bear tomorrow." Angie then wrote her name in crayon. Rather than be disloyal by using a substitute bear, Angie mustered the courage to sleep with no teddy bear at nap time. She endured the consequences of forgetting dear teddy. But she figured out how to prevent the problem from occurring again.

Now I know you're thinking that the problem solving process must have taken all day. It didn't. It took about 15 minutes, and believe me, sometimes that feels like all day. During those 15 minutes it took effort to communicate — on Angie's part and mine. It required me to listen to Angie's feelings. It required my teacher aides to deal with the other children while I assisted Angie! But in the long run, I believe the extra time paid off. Do I spend this much time with every problem a child has? Of course not. There are times for quick action, and I take it. But I do believe it's very helpful to involve children in problem solving whenever feasible. Helping children solve their own problems some of the time is better than never doing it at all.

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It's our obligation to help children develop independence and decision making skills. If I had solved Angie's problem, it might have been quicker. But I would be making Angie dependent on me. It's better for Angie (and society as a whole) if she learns to be a competent person who is able to handle her own life with all of its ups and downs.

Problem solving is one of the most valuable skills we can pass on to our children. I'm not sure what problems our kids will be facing in the next century, or even decade. The best I can do is equip children with the skills needed to solve problems they face today. With any luck, the skill will serve them well throughout a lifetime.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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