

FOCUS

on Early Childhood Mental Health



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Factsheet #15, 5/10

Problem-Solving

James wants a wagon Amy is pulling. He asks Amy why he can't have it, and Amy says, "Because I need it. I'm pulling rocks." "I can help you pull the rocks," says James, and the two play together happily. Imagine another scenario: James wants the wagon and tries to grab it from Amy; Amy grabs it back, James hits her, and she cries. The teacher (or parent) tells James to leave Amy alone and go find something else to play with. Everyone would probably agree that the first scenario is much better than the second because James and Amy solved their own problem.

Learning to solve problems on their own not only helps children develop self-confidence and feel more in control of their own lives (when so many things are beyond their control); it also helps prevent more significant issues like aggression and more violent behavior.

Helping children talk to each other when they have a conflict:

- Be firm ("I won't let you hit.")
- Be empathetic ("I know how much you want to play with the wagon.")
- Maintain a positive attitude ("She might give it to you if you ask.")
- Encourage persistence ("Well, asking didn't work. What else could you try?")¹

Questions to ask to help children think through a problem and possible solution:

- What's the problem?
- How do you think s/he feels when you hit?
- What happened (or might happen) when you did (do) that?
- Can you think of a different way to solve the problem?
- Do you think that is or is not a good idea? Why?²

A problem-solving model

- Identify the problem (e.g., the real reason James is hitting Amy)
- Brainstorm two or three different solutions
- Choose one solution and try it
- Evaluate what happened (whether the solution worked and why or why not)³

Sources:

¹ "Teaching Young Children Problem-Solving Skills," by Janet Gonzalez-Mena; www.education.com/print/teach-young-children-problem-solving

² "How to Think, Not What to Think: A Cognitive Approach to Prevention of Early High-Risk Behaviors in Children," by Myrna B. Shure; http://www.parecovery.org/documents/Early_High_Risk_1997.pdf

³ "Problem Solving in Early Childhood Classrooms"; www.ericdigests.org/1993/early.htm