Problem-Solving with Others

What You Need to Know
Preschool children are still learning how to effectively resolve disagreements. In order to do so, they need to take the perspective of another person *and* understand how their actions impact others. For example, a child is not likely to think about how taking a toy from a child would make that child mad or sad, and this stands in the way of finding a safe, fair solution. The skills needed to solve problems are learned just like academic skills – they don't develop on their own or overnight. You can empower children to learn to solve their own problems by helping them to identify the problem, take another child's perspective, and come up with and implement a solution when issues arise.

Things to Consider
Benjamin Franklin said, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." While this is true for many circumstances, it certainly applies to supporting problem-solving between preschoolers. Prevention in the form of careful monitoring coupled with the knowledge of what triggers struggles can alleviate many potential problems. For example, being hungry, tired, angry, frustrated, bored, or over-stimulated can reduce a child's ability to navigate social interactions.

Development of Problem-Solving Skills

Between 36 and 48 months, children may:	Between 48 and 60 months, children may:
Begin to recognize and describe social problems.	Recognize and describe basic social problems.
Suggest solutions to conflicts with adult guidance and support.	Express feelings, needs, and opinions in conflict situations.
	Suggest solutions or compromises to conflict when in a group.
	Seek adult help when needed to resolve conflicts.

Setting the Stage
Activities and materials that provide practice for problem-solving skills:
 ♦ Use visual cue cards of solutions. Practice with these cards before problems occur and help children use these as a tool in the moment as well. For example, see the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations' Solution Kit and cue cards.
   o http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/strategies.html
   o http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/modules/2006/solutionkit.pdf
 ♦ Set up discussions of problems **before** they occur (e.g., "Okay, we are about to go outside and there are only 2 bikes, but I think everyone will want a turn. What can we do?").
 ♦ Discuss conflicts and resolutions in books and with puppets.
 ♦ For nonverbal children, post visuals throughout your classroom with core words or relevant vocabulary. This alternative form of communication will allow children to point to words or phrases when engaging with peers. This can prevent communication frustration and support children to communicate to solve problems. For example, hang visuals of core words like 'yes,' 'no,' 'help,' 'my turn,' 'please,' etc.
 ♦ Use social narratives to preview scenarios and potential problems/solutions.
 ♦ Some children with executive functioning challenges (as seen in autism spectrum disorder) may need additional support with impulse control. This would present as a child silently taking a toy from another child with little acknowledgement of their emotions or reaction, for example. In the moment, this can erupt into a BIG problem for little ones! Use First-Then statements to encourage the child to wait their turn. For example, "(Child) was playing with that toy and now they are sad that you took it from them. *First* (Child) will play with the toy, and *then* you can play with it when they are finished."

OBSERVE	**OBSERVE**
	Carefully observe and consider the context when conflicts occur. Notice particular times during the day or certain activities that are more prone to peer conflict (e.g., are there more issues before snack or right after nap?). When you observe a conflict occurring, think about what else is happening – the *context* of the situation. Is there something in the environment that is making this problem more likely to happen? It's likely that the reason is less about the child and more about the circumstances.
FOCUS	**Narrate Problems and Solutions**
	Focus children's attention on problems *and* solutions that they are *not* directly involved in at the moment.
	♦ Reading a book, "Uh-oh. They both want to build in the same place – that's a problem. They're crying. What can they do to solve their problem? Let's find out…"
	♦ "(Other teacher) and I both want to use the phone. Hmmm, how can we solve this… Let's look at the solution cards for ideas… Oh, I know! We'll take turns. They can use it first and then I'll get it next."
SCAFFOLD I	**Reflect the Problem**
	Scaffold I: **Reflect the problem and feelings**
	Scaffold II**: Prompt children to find/accept a solution**
	♦ "What's the problem? How are you feeling? (*wait for explanation*) Okay, you both want to use the same truck. How can we solve this problem? Let's look to our *Solution Cards* for ideas." Look through the cards and discuss each option until the children choose or create a solution they both agree on.
SCAFFOLD II	**Prompt Children to Find/Accept a Solution**
	Scaffold I: **Reflect the problem and feelings**
	Scaffold II**: Prompt children to find/accept a solution**
	♦ "What's the problem? How are you feeling? (*wait for explanation*) Okay, you both want to use the same truck. How can we solve this problem? Let's look to our S*olution Cards* for ideas." Look through the cards and discuss each option until the children choose or create a solution they both agree on.
KEEP IT GOING	Consider what you learned from observing children as well as their reaction to your Focus and Scaffolds. Find ways to build the activities in the Setting the Stage into your regular routines.

From the STREAMin[3] Curriculum – Preschool Version: http://streamin3.org
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