Problem-Solving with Tasks

What You Need to Know
Previously, you focused on supporting children as they solved problems occurring with their **peers**.

This week, you will focus on problem-solving related to **tasks** (e.g., activities or regular routines). Toddlers are developing their problem-solving skills when they find solutions (e.g., turn a puzzle piece or shape multiple ways to make it fit, lay on their bellies to scoot under a table to get a ball, or call to you for more crackers), but also when they repeat actions or engage in the same task over and over again. This repeated practice builds their understanding of how things work, which promotes later problem-solving. You can help children develop their problem-solving skills (and their confidence in these skills!) by giving them the space and opportunity to figure things out while providing intentional, but minimal, support and encouraging them to "keep trying."

Things to Consider
It's natural (and necessary!) that children see adults as a resource (e.g., someone to turn to for help when they have a problem). But it can be easy for adults to help children a little *too* much. Sometimes adults are too quick to solve children's problems because adults want to "speed things up" or relieve a child's distress. But when adults are too quick to fix the problem, children miss the opportunity to build their **own** skills and confidence. A little frustration and uneasiness can actually be motivating! It's best to observe closely, provide encouragement, and provide support while letting children figure things out on their own as much as possible – even if that means they struggle a bit! It is the adult's responsibility to know when to step in.

Problem-solving with tasks also requires cognitive flexibility for children to be able to cope with tasks that may not go as planned (see Regulate: Cognitive Flexibility and Regulate: Managing Emotions). Some children may need support to be flexible thinkers. Be sure to know children's frustration tolerance so you can provide scaffolds before participation and engagement in the task is lost.

Development of Problem-Solving with Tasks

Between 9 and 18 months, children may:	Between 16 and 36 months, children may:
Try different solutions to everyday problems until discovering one that works.	Engage in activities for longer periods of time and try many times and ways to solve more challenging problems.
Try the same strategy multiple times even if it doesn't work.	Try to solve the same problem in several different ways at different times.
Act intentionally to achieve a goal or when manipulating an object (e.g., trying to get an adult to do something or trying different ways to reach a ball).	Use problem-solving and experimenting to figure out solutions to everyday problems.
	Try to fix things that are broken, such as putting a toy back together or using tape to repair torn paper.
	Plan ways to solve problems based on knowledge and experience, such as getting a stool to reach a book that is on a shelf after trying to reach it on tiptoes.

Setting the Stage
Activities and materials that support the development of problem-solving skills:
- Provide naturally-challenging materials (e.g., puzzles, shape sorting boxes, or magnet blocks).
- Provide challenging tasks. For example:
  - Provide 2 buckets (one with water) and a dropper/spoon. The task or "problem" is to get the water from one bucket to the other.
  - Get objects slightly stuck in cardboard tubes and provide sticks or pinchers to remove.
  - Put stuffed animals inside boxes or laundry baskets. Cover the top with string or tape. Watch to see if children work to find ways to get the animals out.

Intentional Teaching Practices to Support Problem-Solving with Tasks

OBSERVE	**OBSERVE**
	Observe children to see how they handle problems. Do they persist through challenges? Who tries a few things before coming to you for help? Do they give up when things become difficult – do they walk away, get frustrated, or ask for help a little too soon? Or, maybe they don't use you as a resource at all and don't ask for help even when appropriate. Who could benefit from extra support?
FOCUS	**Acknowledge Effort**
	Focus on the *effort* that children show rather than praising the results. Praising effort encourages persistence. Great problem-solvers must accept and learn from mistakes. Focusing on effort builds the confidence that children need to take risks, come up with, and try out different solutions.
	◆ "Wow, you are really trying hard to figure out where to put that piece. I see you keep turning it." instead of, "You are so smart! You knew just what to do! You solved the problem!"
SCAFFOLD I	**Promote Child Autonomy**
	Provide support instead of solving problems *for* children. Watch closely so that you can provide hints or clues that help children come up with or carry out solutions on their own as much as possible.
	◆ A child is banging the cardboard tube with the stick, so you ask, "I wonder if there is another way to use that stick to get it out?" or, "Hmmm, the stick can't reach it from there… Is there another way to help it reach?"
	◆ A child is holding a dropper but doesn't know how to use it, so you model and narrate how without actually transferring the water for them.
	Child autonomy (and a part of problem-solving for young children) also includes communicating when they need help. Some children need support to recognize that asking for help can be part of the problem-solving process. Provide visuals for "help," model requests for children to imitate, and let children know that you are there if they need. These supports can help children feel more confident in engaging in the problem-solving process and prevent strong emotions when things don't go as planned.
SCAFFOLD II	**Ask Open-Ended Questions**
	Ask open-ended questions (i.e., questions that require more than a short or single-word answer).
	◆ "Hmmm, I wonder how we can get this out. What do you think we should do?"
	When children present you with a problem (verbally or non-verbally), try responding with open-ended questions instead of answers to help them practice finding their *own* solutions.
	◆ "You are pointing to the bear. I think you want it out. What do you think we can do to get it out?"
	Note: For younger toddlers, you may need to provide possible solutions for them to consider, but asking the open-ended questions first models the process they will later engage in.
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.