

LADC Behavior Handout

Teaching Flexibility and Problem-Solving Skills



Learn How to Foster Flexible Thinking and Teach Problem Solving Skills to Your Child

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Help your child learn to stretch their brains with flexible thinking!

Flexible Thinking and Problem Solving

Does your child ever get upset when playing with other children because something didn't go their way? Maybe they have a meltdown when someone is playing with the toy that they always like to play with. Often meltdowns or aggressive behavior in social situations occur because the child has a deficit in problem solving skills. If we can teach children how to problem solve in situations with others, we can minimize the number of behavioral outbursts, the amount of tattling, the fights between siblings, and the times our child hits to get what they wanted.

Through the process of teaching a child to problem solve, we are teaching them how to be a flexible thinker. Flexible thinking allows children to look at the situation differently, rather than being focused on only one solution. Through teaching flexible thinking, we are helping children “unlearn” their old ways of doing things and recognize that there are many “right” ways to do things. Just as we must stretch our muscles to keep them from getting stiff and ensure they are working correctly; we must also stretch our brains by finding different ways of doing things.

Steps to Teach Problem Solving

Step 1: Anticipate

The first and most important step is to anticipate when a problem may arise for your child. What situations are harder for your child? When are there usually meltdowns? Are they more common in the morning or in the afternoon? Are they likely to happen when playing with a specific sibling? Do they happen when playing with specific toys?

Have you ever heard of the phrase “eyes-on-the-back-of-their-head”? Learning to anticipate these problem-solving situations will help you feel like you are on top of things and have eyes on the back of your head!

Problem Solving Steps Continued

Step 2: Be Close

Once you have determined some areas where the problem situations are more common, make sure that you are physically close to your child during those situations. By being close, you can possibly prevent the meltdown from occurring by stepping in before it is too late, or you can help model what to do once they become frustrated. The idea is to be close enough that you can turn these situations into practice opportunities and prompt the problem-solving steps. Also, the physical presence of an adult will serve as a visual prompt to the child to practice problem solving.

Step 4: Multiple Solutions

To encourage flexible thinking in children, we want to teach them that there might be multiple ways to solve a problem. Prompting for multiple solutions will help your child from becoming dependent on the same strategies for every problem. We want to encourage children to persist in trying multiple strategies if the first one may not have worked. When children struggle to come up with many solutions on their own, it is helpful to prompt them to look at solution cards or a solution board to get ideas. Eventually, you may want to fade out the use of solution cards so that your child learns to rely on themselves when thinking of solutions, rather than waiting for prompts.

Step 3: Provide Support

We can teach children many times on how to solve problems but until they practice it in real situations, it will be difficult for them to implement it on their own. There are many ways you may need to provide support to your child as they are learning to problem solve:

- At first, you might need to physically help your child stay in proximity to the other child if they tend to run away when problems arise.
- You can verbally prompt your child for suggestions or past ways they have solved the problem.
- You can also prompt them to use visual problem-solving cards to come up with their own solution.
- Additionally, you can prompt them to ask a peer or other sibling for a solution.
- You could also use a puppet to talk through solutions in a fun way for your child.

Step 5: Reinforce Problem Solving Skills

Remember to reinforce your child for trying to problem solve the situation instead of a behavioral outburst or hitting. Problem solving is hard and if you want your child to keep practicing, you must make it rewarding for them until the natural social reinforcement maintains the behavior. You could use a sticker chart, edible reinforcers, or access to fun activities as a reward for problem solving!

Ways to Teach Flexible Thinking

* Play a game where you must try and get from one side of the room to the other without touching the ground

* Play the game, "How Many Ways?"

- Work with your child to figure out different ways to walk from the door to the table, carry water, close the door, or fold a piece of paper.

* Play the game "What can you do with...?"

- Show your child different objects around the house and come up with different things you can do with them (e.g. spoon, paper, a toy car, diaper, etc.)

Phrases to Say to Promote Flexible Thinking

What else can we do? – Maybe next time! – We can do this another way too! – I wonder what would happen if we tried another way? – What would happen if we ____?