

Teaching Children to Problem Solve

By Carolyn Gerard, M.A., MFT

Parents want to see their children thrive in educational, social and recreational pursuits. Our society encourages individuals to do their best and to win. Competition is great for those children with the maturity – usually starting at ages 9 to 12 - to understand the concept of winning and losing. But competition can be harmful if the child internalizes losses and disappointments.

How can we teach our children to deal with difficult situations? How can parents turn upsetting moments into opportunities for their children to learn? When your child shares an upsetting issue with you, remain neutral and help your child to problem solve by asking the following questions:

□ What exactly is the problem?

Focus on the issue and your child's feelings associated with what happened. Does your child feel angry, hurt, insulted, negated, sad, frustrated, abandoned, used, discounted, conflicted, torn, unloved? Rather than attack the other person's character ("He's a jerk"), focus on the offending action ("He embarrassed me in front of my friends"). Don't take all insults personally. Keep an open mind. Consider the possibility the other person also has hurt feelings - "hurt people hurt people."

□ Who has upset feelings about the issue?

Well-meaning friends often get tangled up in problems between two other people. Encourage your child to face the offending party directly if the issue is between your child and the offender. If your child is not directly involved, encourage the involved parties to work through the conflict themselves.

□ Who is responsible for the solution?

If the problem is your child's, be supportive by using the following problem-solving techniques:

- Decide if this issue is worth pursuing.
- Explore your feelings as well as any feelings the offending person may have.
- Decide on the goal (mutual respect) you would like to accomplish.
- Use "I feel" statements as in: "I'm angered by what you said in front of my friends; I don't think you're aware of this, but I was humiliated by what you did. What you said really hurts."
- For the mature child, the goal is to mutually work things out. Take the offender aside and ask questions that help focus on the issue: "Is there something I've done to offend you? Are you all right? Is something bothering you? Is everything okay? Why are you saying these things?"

□ Don't forget to listen

If the problem is the other person's issue, simply listen. Listen for understanding. Listen to the meaning behind the words being spoken. What might your child be feeling? Check it out. Don't try to solve the problem. Instead, help your child brainstorm possible solutions by using the problem-solving questions and techniques.

Rephrase what you hear your child saying and ask clarifying questions to understand the feelings behind the words. Remember, being angry is not a problem. How your child handles upset feelings will determine the quality of future relationships.

About the Author

Carolyn Gerard is a Marriage & Family Therapist, practicing in San Diego. With a practice emphasis in relationship therapy, her specialty includes individual, marital and parenting issues. Her personal experience in a 25 plus-year marriage with five children, including twins, provides a realistic and practical approach to each counseling session. Learn more about Carolyn Gerard at <http://www.camft.org/Therapists/CarolynGerard>.

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