Partnerships to enhance children's problem solving skills

by Jennifer Pearson and Darlene Kordich Hall

As long as we are living and breathing, we can expect challenge and frustration in our daily lives. And while adversity is inevitable, we all have the innate capacity to steer through life's challenges.[1, 2]

However, this natural capacity for resilience can be hampered by the high levels of stress many face in trying to juggle family, job and day-to-day demands. Children also experience stress due to changes in routines, family structure, difficult relationships with other children, hectic schedules etc. They may need support to uncover hidden resiliency abilities that can develop their capacity to handle daily stressors, cope with change and lead their lives in a meaningful way. The significant adults in a child's life, specifically parents and child care practitioners, can play an important role in helping children to enhance their resiliency skills – through role-modelling, providing warm responsive relationships and opportunities to explore cause and effect.

One of the key abilities associated with resilience is problem solving.[1, 2] Learning problem-solving skills is a significant contributor to children's socio-emotional well-being. Luisa Della Croce is a manager of a municipal child

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care setting that serves a very diverse community. She speaks avidly about the benefits of giving children an early start to develop problem-solving skills. "Learning how to identify the root of the problem, develop empathy and broaden perspective are life skills that build self-esteem and self-efficacy. Problem-solving skills empower children to think about themselves and others, and encourage them to develop an understanding of self in the bigger picture of society. We

need to create a culture where problem solving is a natural part of our day."

Problem-solving skills that promote resilience

Programs to teach social problem solving and conflict resolution skills have many of the same basic steps: 1) calming down, 2) identifying the problem, 3) brainstorming alternative solutions, 4) choosing and implementing a solution, and 5) evaluating the success of the strategy.

Our ability to implement these steps is greatly affected by the *accuracy* of our assumptions about the problems we face. Research shows that we can develop *resilient thinking habits* about life's challenges by becoming more accurate about what caused the problem and how it will affect us.[2, 3]

When we're looking at what *caused* the problem, it's important to be as accurate as possible about how much of the problem is our responsibility and how much is due to others or circumstances outside of our control. Most problems are not 100% the result of just one person's errors or actions, yet many of us find it easy to get into a habit of blaming ourselves or others for problems we face.

We can also be more accurate about the *impact* the problem will have. It's helpful to be realistic about how long the problem will affect us and how much of our life is affected. While some problems are permanent and affect many areas of our lives, many daily challenges are temporary and affect only the parts of our lives that are specific to the problem. For example, if we are having a problem with someone at work, it doesn't mean our relationships with friends or family need to suffer. When we see everyday frustrations as temporary and their effects as limited, we feel less overwhelmed and more in control. This allows us to be flexible and creative as we search for realistic solutions.

Developing accurate thinking is a life skill that supports successful social problem solving and is a hallmark of resilience. [2]

How adults can help enhance children's problem solving skills.

Role Modeling
Children as young as two years mimic the thinking and coping style of adults around them. [4] When adults model a calm, flexible approach to problem solving, young children will emulate these behaviors. [5]

One way to do this is by talking "out loud" about our daily challenges. For example, as a practitioner is tidying up a play area, a bin topples over and the toys spill out over the floor. She can demonstrate an effective problem-solving approach by voicing her feelings aloud: "That's frustrating, but now I need to calm down – three deep breaths. Now, I'm going to pick up the toys and stop rushing. It doesn't help me get the job done any faster."

Adults also can model an alternative view when a child's perception about a peer has the potential to cause a problem. For example, when young Hannah wailed, "Chandra is always copying me!" her teacher "reframed" the situation by saying, "Chandra thinks your ideas are so good, she wants to use them, too. You must be very proud of your ideas!"

Relationships
Andrea Brown, an early childhood educator, emphasizes that children need relationships with warm, responsive adults and a safe, non-judgmental environment to maximize their social problem-solving potential. "Children learn about problem solving through interaction. Even in early infancy, they figure out what they need to do by reading the facial expressions and body language of the significant adults in their lives." Empathy – understanding one's feelings and the feelings of others – is a crucial problem-solving ability and children learn to understand and support others by being understood and supported themselves.[5]

Resiliency Skills
While the quality of our relationships with children is crucial, Brown suggests that during a child's first two years it is also essential to give them rich opportunities to explore cause and effect, an important building block of problem solving.

Play-based experiences that allow young children to transform materials with their own hands – such as sand, water and play dough – help them see they can effect a change in their environment.

Children as young as four years old can benefit from child-friendly approaches that help them learn not just what to think, but *how* to think about problems they encounter. Puppet plays, games, role plays and children's literature can be used to explore problem scenarios and give children experience generating solutions to social issues and conflicts. [5, 6]

Adults can promote a proactive problem-solving atmosphere by checking children's perceptions about what caused the problem, how they feel about it and what can be done to solve it.

Children learn by directly experiencing the outcome of their problem-solving efforts.

Kathy Misetich has been working with children and families living in disadvantaged circumstances for over 15 years. She says it's also vital to demonstrate faith in children's ability to solve problems themselves and not interfere by taking over. Children learn by directly experiencing the outcome of their problem-solving efforts. When adults model that making mistakes is simply part of the learning process, they encourage children to persevere to find other solutions.

Adults can also foster children's "I can do it" attitude, or sense of self-efficacy, which in turn helps young ones develop *genuine* self-esteem.[2, 4, 5] Achieving this can be done, in part, through the feedback we give them. Accurate, specific feedback that describes their effort or accomplishment enhances children's confidence and sense of self-worth

because it helps them see the relationship between their actions and the outcomes.[2, 5] For example, "You decided to take turns with the fire truck. That's a good solution. Now you both feel happy."

Partnerships with Parents

When practitioners develop partnerships with parents to enhance children's problem-solving skills, we bring the child's two worlds together and provide security and consistency about expectations in each environment. Della Croce says this promotes faster integration of the skills and makes them more sustainable. Brown adds that partnering with parents is the best way to create a "data base" for the child. Parents can share information about what works and doesn't work at home; practitioners can share their knowledge about successful approaches to building resiliency skills.

This partnership is particularly important for children and families in disadvantaged circumstances. These children may have delays in cognition, language and social-emotional development and require extra assistance to develop skills to succeed at school. Misetich says their parents also need to feel valued and heard, and to learn positive approaches to problem solving themselves.

There are challenges to overcome in order for partnerships with parents to reach their potential. Brown, Misetich and Della Croce all agree – parents need to feel their knowledge is valued and their diversity respected. It's important for practitioners to find creative ways to welcome and empower parents.

Developing these partnerships is crucial for long-term benefits to society. Home and community environments rich in problem-solving opportunities and skills promote children's resilience. Resilient children grow into resilient adults who foster resilience in children, and so on. It's possible to establish this circle of support, but it takes effort, planning and problem solving to do it!

Please see *CCCF Resource Sheet #90* for more information on how families and practitioners can work together to enhance resilience in young children.

Please see *the CCCF website (www.qualitychildcarecanada.ca)* for workshop materials that you can download for free to help you host a learning event on this topic.

References

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