



READY for SCHOOL Parent News:
Problem Solving

Being able to solve problems independently is an essential *Ready for School* skill. As parents, it is easy (and almost always quicker) to try to solve problems for children. However, giving a child enough uninterrupted time to solve a problem independently or with help is an important skill for success in school.

There are typically four steps to problem solving:

- 1) Understanding the problem
- 2) Planning how to solve it
- 3) Carrying out the plan
- 4) Reviewing the solution

Offering children ample time for each step, when possible, is important; however, don't expect children to go systematically through the four steps above. They may jump back and forth or omit steps. Certainly, there are lots of problems that due to the busy nature of family's lives can't be solved at the moment or must be solved with a parent's help, but when there is the luxury of time, take advantage of it.

Some sample problems a preschooler might face:

- Juan has been asked to put his bike away, but he can't seem to get it to fit in the already full storage shed. He pushes other things around, but there still isn't enough space.
- Stephanie wants to make her own peanut butter and jelly sandwich, but the bread tears every time she tries to spread it.
- Darryl wants to buy a new toy he saw at the store, but his mom has told him he will have to save up the money himself.

How can parents help preschoolers with these problems and maximize the learning experience with each step of the problem solving process?

Understanding the problem: Allowing plenty of time in the beginning to explore the problem is important. Don't rush in with your own solution too quickly.

Planning how to solve it: In this stage, the adult plays a crucial role in asking open-ended vs. "yes-no" questions. Asking questions like "What could you do to make this work?" and "What other things can you think of?" will be important.

Carrying out the plan: Many children will want to move quickly to this stage of trying out solutions. Trial and error learning is useful. Offer your child chances to try things and make mistakes. The adult's role will be to help the child reflect as he/she tries things. "Why do you think that didn't work?" "Do you have some other ideas?"

Reviewing the solution: The adult can assist the learning process by reflecting on what was tried and how he/she got to that solution. "Which worked better to spread the peanut butter, the plastic knife or the metal knife?" "Did you notice a difference between the white bread and the wheat bread?" It is equally important to reflect on both what didn't work and what did work. At the same time, don't ask too many questions. If your child is ready to move on to a new challenge, allow him or her to do that. The whole problem-solving process may just take a matter of minutes, or it could take quite a bit longer depending on the problem, your child's interest in the problem, and the time available.

Children also learn from adults modeling problem-solving. You can model the steps as you solve your own problems. "This ground is too hard to dig. I wonder what I could do to help get it softer?"

It is not always possible to take all the time needed for your child to solve simple problems, but when you do have that luxury, take full advantage of the opportunity.