

Teaching Kids to Problem Solve



by Karen Stephens

I was with four-year-old Angie. She had just arrived at child care, and already she was in tears. With a touch to her bangs, I tried to empathize with her apparent sadness. I sat beside her, offering a tissue. She turned away, crying louder. I suggested perhaps she was feeling sad about her mom leaving. Still crying, she said “No.” Frustrated with my denseness, she blurted out she was upset about forgetting her teddy bear for nap.

Ah, progress. At least she’d identified the problem. That was a first step toward a solution. It turns out, Angie’s household was in a rush that morning, and teddy was left behind. (Sound familiar?) She was none too pleased about this. She was frustrated and dreaded nap time without her love-worn teddy. Once Angie unloaded all her feelings, (and a lot of tears), we could move onto resolution. Of course, I could have solved the problem pretty quickly on my own. I mean, I am the adult after all. But I’m big on making children responsible for their behavior.

When Angie fessed up that she couldn’t bear to think of napping without her bear, I empathized by restating what I believed was the problem. “You’re frustrated because you don’t have your teddy bear for nap time.” When she confirmed I was correct, Angie took the first step in the problem solving process — she identified the problem. I said, “Yes, you have a problem. How could you solve it?”

By asking, “How could you solve it?” I moved Angie on to the next step of problem solving, brainstorming possible solutions. Following are two solutions Angie brainstormed:

Solution #1:

“Let’s go out and get my Mom and tell her to bring my teddy bear to school.”

Solution #2:

“Let’s call Mom on the telephone and tell her to bring my Teddy Bear.”

To help her, I suggested a possible solution #3:

She could borrow one of the child care center’s stuffed animals for today’s nap and bring her own for tomorrow. After brainstorming each idea, I helped Angie evaluate how effective each would be. By asking calculated questions, I gradually guided her in deciding which solutions were workable:

Response to #1:

“You’ve been crying quite a while. Do you think your mom is still in the parking lot so we can catch her?” Angie’s answer: “No.”

Response to #2:

“We could call your mom, but are there telephones in college classrooms?” Answer: “I don’t know.” I told Angie I knew for sure there weren’t telephones in college classrooms.

Response to #3:

This was my suggestion to borrow one of the center’s stuffed animals. Personally I thought it was a brilliant idea. Three guesses what Angie thought about it: “Noooooooooooooooo!!!! I need my *blue* teddy bear!”

I was stumped. Three solutions suggested, three solutions shot down. Then Angie went back to the brainstorming step. She said, “I know. Let’s write my mom a letter and tell her

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