

THE POWER OF PROBLEM SOLVING

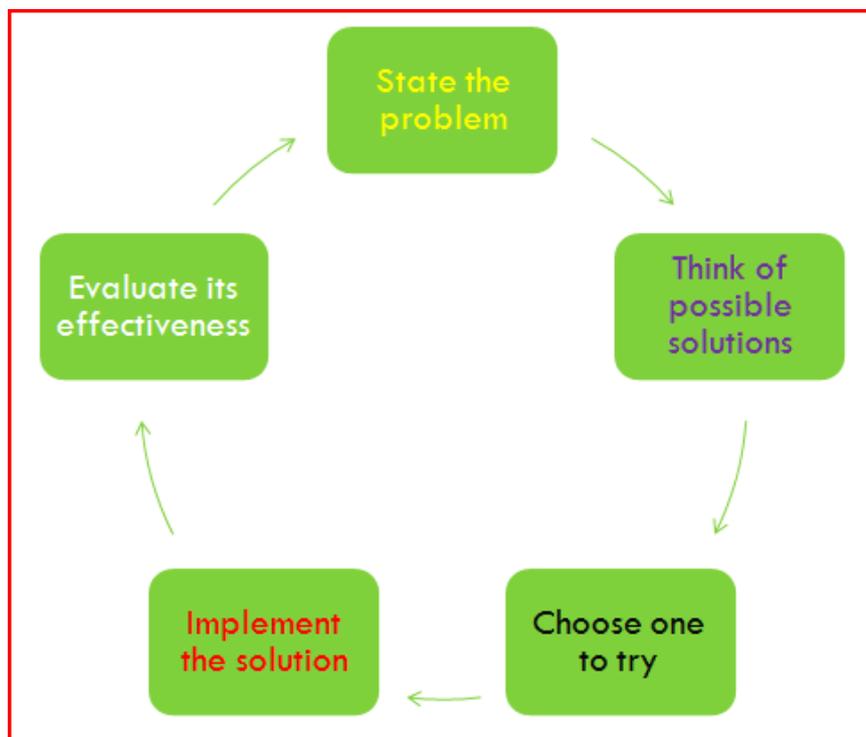
This paper arose from speculation about the place of “rules” in enhancing social relationships and managing behaviour. A long-accepted strategy has been to involve children in the establishment of rules within the education or care setting. While this is a strategy that acknowledges the importance of children having a measure of ownership over decisions affecting them, the emphasis on “rules” has some inherent drawbacks. This paper presents the argument that an approach which focuses on problem solving with children may be more advantageous than one based on the setting of rules. Problem solving can contribute to a positive group climate, which in turn provides the foundation for a child’s sense of wellbeing within the education and care setting, and plays a crucial role in a child’s involvement, development and learning (Laevers, 2012).

The children’s story, *Library Lion* by Michelle Knudsen, provides a telling example of how “rules”, by their very nature, tend to be inflexible, with a locked-in view of how the world should be. In dealing with relationships, there are limited black and white scenarios and MANY shades of grey. Being flexible to adapt to different perspectives and experiences is of paramount importance. A reliance on rules, even those made in conjunction with children, may bring with it the disadvantage of “being backed into a corner” from which it can be hard to extricate oneself. An over reliance on rules may also slip easily into being a soft option where the voices of children are rarely heard.

In comparison, introducing a focus on problem solving brings with it opportunities to work with, and listen to children, to encourage children to work and think together and to significantly contribute to development and learning in many areas. Problem solving can be employed with individuals as well as small, and large, groups of children. It can be used to address issues across the whole program - ranging from how to make the bus at inside time, people speaking angrily to each other, disagreements over who is using the wheelbarrows, coping with a visitor being delayed in traffic and arriving late, a broken toilet, what is the best food for a fairy party – the possibilities are endless!

Problem solving can be approached in a variety of ways. It can be as simple as **posing questions** to children - “How do you think you could make the wings for your jet?” or “How will you and Sonja share the fairy crystals?” or by engaging in **wondering** with children - “I wonder how you can let the other children know how much your cakes will cost?” or “I wonder what you will do if all the pipes are being used in the mud patch?”

For problem solving to be a major focus in a program, it is also of benefit to introduce a **problem solving process** to children. This process involves the steps of:



As a strategy for enhancing social relationships, problem solving has a very obvious role to play in assisting children with conflict resolution. However, the actual *process* involved in problem solving, for whatever purpose, also provides authentic opportunities to enhance relationships within a setting. Problem solving with others can facilitate exposure to and acceptance of different perspectives, practice in talking and listening to others, and the scaffolding of deeper level thinking as children consider actions and reactions. It has the potential to contribute significantly to a sense of community as children engage in the process with a wide range of peers beyond their preferred playmates. The conversational approach of the problem solving process involves children in sustained shared thinking, with such interactions being identified as crucial in extending children’s thinking and learning (NQS PLP e-Newsletter No.43 2012). Rather than resulting in a “rule” to be followed, problem solving can lead to a decision being made about action to be taken and it has the potential to become an ongoing conversation within a group.

“Walking inside”: A kindergarten group had been having issues with children forgetting to walk inside. This was brought to everyone’s attention at group time. It was a problem because a child had fallen down and two other children had “collided” with one another when they were running inside. The question was posed to the group: “How can we help people to remember to walk inside?” Solutions offered by children included - tell them to stop, tell them they are naughty, put up a sign, put up a stop sign, put up your hand and say stop. All the suggestions were accepted without judgement (a crucial part of this step) and everybody was thanked for sharing their ideas. After some discussion it was decided to make a sign that said “please walk inside kindly”. We knew that not everybody would be able to read the words so it was also decided that children might help to draw pictures on the sign to help us remember what the words said. This led to further discussion of what the pictures would be about – maybe a smiling face because we would be happy, maybe someone walking, maybe the colours of kindly, maybe two people bumping into each other. The sign was duly made with six children choosing to add drawings. When finished it was placed on the wall at child height. Several times, children have been overheard saying to others “Remember the sign (or “Look at the sign”). Walk inside.”

Even when the problem to be solved is not related to a social issue, the process itself provides an experience which can build on a child’s sense of wellbeing and enhance connections within a group. It facilitates turn taking and the consideration of others and can afford children a sense of agency as, by its very nature, the process infers the competency and capability of children and their ability to impact on their environment.

“Food for dinosaurs”: At group time, Bill announced that he was going to make an island for dinosaurs to live on. The discussion turned to what the dinosaurs would need to eat on their island and trees were an agreed option. And so the problem was stated: “How could Bill make the trees? Does anyone have a suggestion?” Several hands went up and possibilities were voiced. Again suggestions were accepted without judgement. Ideas included drawing on paper and cutting out, building with blocks, using cardboard rolls, using the plastic sticks from the shed. Everyone was thanked for sharing their ideas and it was also stated that now Bill would be able to decide how he would solve his problem. Bill implemented a solution during play and when the group came together again, he was able to tell us what he had done (he had elected to use stickle bricks to build trees) and if the solution had worked.

Utilising a problem solving process requires teachers and educators to employ a range of skills to allow such conversations to take place, and to expand and flourish. These skills include management of situations so that children's voices are heard, modelling acceptance of ideas and contributions, and maintaining sustained shared thinking through clarification, reframing, speculating, questioning and showing **genuine** interest (Siraj-Blatchford, 2005).

The benefits of involving children in problem solving are many, and easily address the Early Years Learning Framework Outcomes. Through involvement in problem solving, children have opportunities to:

- Develop their sense of confidence, inter-dependence, resilience and sense of agency, to feel supported and to interact with others with care, empathy and respect as all contributions are accepted and valued (EYLF 1).
- Develop a sense of belonging to groups as they contribute to the problem solving process, to respond to diversity with respect as they listen to the ideas of others, and to become aware of fairness as they take turns to contribute and engage in the process of choosing and evaluating possible solutions (EYLF 2).
- Become strong in their social and emotional wellbeing as they demonstrate trust and confidence in the problem solving process, working collaboratively with others and self regulating and managing their emotions as issues are addressed (EYLF 3).
- Develop dispositions for learning such as cooperation, creativity, enthusiasm, persistence and imagination, and skills and processes related to problem solving, experimentation, hypothesising, researching and investigating, and to transfer and adapt what they learn from one context to another as solutions from one problem are adapted to another situation (EYLF 4), and
- To interact verbally with others (as both speakers and listeners) as problems are discussed, and to go on to express ideas in a range of ways as solutions are implemented (EYLF 5).

Problem solving takes time and commitment on the part of adults but it provides opportunities to make a significant impact on the quality of the group experience.

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