Problem-Solving with Others

What You Need to Know

It's a familiar scene in a toddler classroom – a toddler sees a toy that looks fun, and they take it without any awareness of whether or not another child was playing with it. The other child is devastated and a tug-of-war over the desired toy has both toddlers yelling, "Mine!" Toddlers are just developing interest in their peers, beginning to play beside each other, and may even engage in some back-and-forth play. As they begin to play with each other, they start to learn about the social rules of play. These skills are learned just like academic skills – they don't develop on their own or overnight. For very young children, supporting problem-solving is often done by providing children with language to help them understand what the problem is, what everyone is feeling, and what could be a successful solution. And, you can help older toddlers begin to identify solutions to problems themselves.

Things to Consider

- Prevention in the form of careful monitoring coupled with the knowledge of what triggers struggles can alleviate many potential problems. For example, being hungry, tired, angry, frustrated, or overstimulated can reduce a young child's ability to navigate social interactions.
- Young children are not intentionally being 'mean' when they grab another child's toy or even when they hit another child. They're doing what they do – being active, exploring, and taking what they want. Toddlers need your help as they learn what is acceptable behavior and what is not.

Development of Problem-Solving Skills

Between 9 and 18 months, children may:	Between 16 and 36 months, children may:
Look to familiar adults for assistance and guidance with actions and behavior.	Begin to manage and adjust actions and behavior with the guidance of familiar adults.
	Using words or signs such as "Stop" or "No" during conflict with a peer instead of hitting.
	Communicate verbally or non-verbally about basic needs.
	Learn and follow some basic rules for managing actions and behavior in familiar settings.

Setting the Stage

Activities and materials that provide practice for problem-solving skills:

- Set up discussions of problems **before** they occur (e.g., "Okay, we are about to go outside and there are only 2 bikes, but I think everyone will want a turn. What can we do?").
- Provide activities that require sharing/turn-taking in order to give children practice avoiding and resolving issues.
- Discuss conflicts and resolutions in books, social narratives, and using puppets.
- For nonverbal children, post visuals throughout your classroom with core words or relevant vocabulary. This alternate form of communication will allow children to point to words or phrases when engaging with peers. This can prevent communication frustration and support children to communicate to solve problems. For example, hang visuals of core words like 'yes,' 'no,' 'help,' 'my turn,' 'please,' etc.
- Use visual cue cards of solutions. Practice by modeling with these cards before problems occur and help children use these as a tool in the moment as well.

Monday OBSERVE	**OBSERVE** Carefully observe and consider the context when conflicts occur. Notice particular times during the day or certain activities that are more prone to peer conflict (e.g., are there more issues before snack or right after nap?). When you observe a conflict occurring, think about what else is happening – the *context* of the situation. Is there something in the environment that is making this problem more likely to happen? Are there additional supports you can have in place to help children communicate and problem-solve (e.g., visuals, communication boards)? It's likely that the reason is less about the child and more about the circumstances.
Tuesday FOCUS	**Narrate Problems and Solutions** Focus children's attention on problems **and** solutions that they are not directly involved in at the moment. ♦ Reading a book, "Uh-oh. They both want to build in the same place – that's a problem. They're crying. What can they do to solve their problem? Let's find out…" ♦ "(Other teacher) and I both want to use the phone. Hmmm, how can we solve this? Oh! We'll take turns. They can use it first, and then I'll get it next."
Wednesday - Thursday SCAFFOLD I & II	**Reflect the Problem *and*** **Prompt Children to Find/Accept a Solution** Focus on using both Scaffolds **when conflicts arise**. ♦ "Oh, (Child 1) took this toy; they wanted to play with it, but (Child 2) was already playing with it. They had it first and now they're very upset. What should we do? (*pause – do not expect a response from young children, but you should still pause to let them consider*). Hmm, I think we need to give it back to (Child 2) right now. They can play with it for a little longer and then you can have a turn, (Child 1)." ♦ "You are pointing to the bike; did you want a turn? (Child) is on it right now, so let's see what we can do to find a solution to this problem. (S*how visual choices about possible solutions*) Hmm, you pointed to 'use a timer.' That is a great solution!"
Friday KEEP IT GOING	Consider what you learned from observing children on Monday as well as their reaction to your Focus and Scaffolds. Find ways to build the activities in the Setting the Stage into your regular routines.