



Social Problem Solving

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Many parents expect that preschool will provide children with a chance to develop their social skills. Social skills include the ability to follow and participate in group activities, have conversations with other children, play cooperatively, and develop friendships. In addition to these, an important social skill for children to learn is social problem solving.

Social problem solving is the ability to solve problems that arise with another child. During the course of the day, there are many opportunities for social problem solving: when children want the same object, when children want to sit in the same place at circle time, when children have different ideas about what to build in the block area, and so on. Rather than view these occurrences as bumps on the road to learning, we see them as critically important learning opportunities.

For our youngest two year olds, social problem solving involves simply becoming aware of one's own feelings, beginning to articulate those feelings, and understanding that there is another child who has feelings. For example, if a two year old is playing with a toy and another child takes it, the teacher will get down close to both children and say "Jack, you were playing with that toy and Dora took it. You seem sad. Dora, Jack was playing with that toy. Look at his face. He is sad. You need to give it back to him. You need a toy. Let's find another toy for you."

As children get older, they are more able to participate in solving problems. With the older children teachers use a specific technique.

First the teacher points out that there is a problem: "It looks like there is a big problem here! Let's see if we can solve it."

Then s/he asks each child to say what the problem is. "Jack, can you tell Dora what the problem is? Dora, can you tell Jack what you think the problem is?" It is important to understand that while the "aggressor" is not permitted to take toys, s/he has valid needs and requires help meeting his/her needs in pro-social ways.

Then the teacher helps the children to brainstorm possible solutions and checks to make sure that the solution is OK with each child. Children often come up with solutions that adults do not think of! For example, Jack may suggest that he and Dora go and play somewhere else together. If that is OK with both of them, the problem is solved. If not, they continue to think of solutions until they find one that is OK with both children.

As the year progresses, children become more independent with social problem solving. By the time they are four, many children are able to solve social problems without a teacher's help because they know the steps involved and how to think of creative ideas.

Social problem solving will not guarantee that children do not have conflict throughout their day, but children who develop social problem solving skills are able to manage conflict productively and independently.