

## November

### What exactly is problem-solving?

We use problem-solving skills on a constant basis. Problem solving is not about memorizing facts like historical dates or the letters of the alphabet. Instead, it is about using two very important skills - the ability to think logically and the ability to think creatively when using and applying facts to solve problems. Engaging in problem-solving activities play a vital role in developing a young adult's ability to learn, think, feel confident, and be competent at understanding their world. What could be more important!

*Creative-thinking and critical-thinking skills are essential components of problem solving.*

**Critical Thinking** is the ability to mentally break down a problem or an idea into parts and analyze them. Sorting, classifying, and comparing similarities and differences are all a part of this important skill.

**Creative thinking** is the ability to look at a problem in many different ways. This might involve seeing a different way to do something, generating new ideas, or using materials in unique ways. To be a creative thinker is the willingness to take risks, to experiment, and even to make mistakes.

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### Let's get started!

**What you can do:** Part of encouraging creative thinking is helping individuals become both fluent and flexible thinkers. Fluent thinkers have the ability to come up with ideas; flexible thinkers are able to see many possibilities or view objects or situations in *new* ways. Just as problem solving takes place all day long, so can the activities you do to encourage young adults to be creative thinkers. Here are a few suggestions:

- **Brainstorm.** Invite your young adult to be fluent thinkers by asking them to respond to questions that have many right answers. Incorporate these questions into the interests young adults are involved with and the situations they are in. For instance, if young adults are having a discussion about nighttime, you might ask them to think of everything that lights up in the night, all the people who work at night, all the things they'd like to do if they stayed up all night.
- **Reflect.** Help your young adult to be flexible thinkers by asking them to comment on specific objects or situations in your room. (Remember, this activity, too, works best in the context of what is going on.) For instance, Carla is at the grocery store and can't find a specific item she is looking for. What are some ways she can look for this item? Or, when watching a television show or movie, and the character looks upset. What are some reasons he might look this way?

## December

### *Nurturing a problem-solver*

Think of yourself as having four roles: observer, supporter, facilitator, and model. You will be watching, encouraging, interacting as a questioning partner, and sharing with your young adult on how you solve problems.

Let's start off with the observer and supporter roles...

#### *As an observer:*

Step back and watch your young adult's independent problem solving. Sometimes it may seem easier and faster to jump in and solve a problem for him/her or to show them the "right" way. **BUT** stepping in too early can stifle their thinking or send a subtle message that you're not confident they can think problems through by themselves. Instead of intervening right away, step back and watch his/her problem-solving skills unfold. Keep in mind that your young adult's problem solving doesn't always look like a thinking activity. In fact, it can look like an argument, an experiment, or an unusual and messy way to use materials.

#### *As a supporter:*

**Acknowledge his/her efforts, let them know that what they are doing is important.** Offer verbal support: "Look at all the different ways you're trying to \_\_\_\_\_. You're working hard to figure it out, aren't you?" At times, nonverbal support may be all that's needed - a smile, an understanding nod, or a thumbs up can show support and encourage him/her to continue in their thinking process. Remember too, that just by sitting quietly next to your young adult, you can communicate: "I understand what you're doing, and I know it's important."

**Create accepting environments where young adults feel free to express their ideas without fear of being wrong or of not being taken seriously.** Make sure your setting is a protective "laboratory" where he/she knows they can experiment and practice problem-solving skills throughout each day.

## January

### *Nurturing a problem-solver...Continued*

#### *As a facilitator:*

**Watch for times when he/she is engaged in problem solving and interject provocative questions to propel them into new ways of thinking.** Remember open-ended, divergent questions have many possible answers and, so, invite him/her to think and problem-solve. Closed-ended, convergent questions have right and wrong answers and can actually block his/her thinking processes.

**Encourage him/her to express themselves.** Rather than telling your young adult about what they can make at the art table today, try showing them the materials and inviting them to brainstorm ideas. You might say, "I need your help. I brought in this bag full of art materials. What do you think we can make?" Then let him/her act on their ideas and make whatever they choose, offering your suggestions too. This approach is a very successful way to help him/her feel comfortable solving problems. When they see that you don't have one "right" answer or method in mind, they can move past fears of being "wrong" and draw on their wonderful creative thinking.

**Provide a variety of problem-solving experiences.** Offer games, puzzles, discussions, literature, and projects - a wide range of activities that inspire creative and critical thinking and encourage him/her to stretch their minds.

#### *As a model:*

**Think about your own approach to problem solving.** Whether you're aware of it or not, he/she is always watching you. They observe how you deal with problems as examples of ways they might solve problems themselves. Talk about problem solving. When problems arise in the room, discuss your thought processes as you work through the problem. For example, you might say, "I have a problem. I planned to make tacos today, but we've run out of ground meat. What do you think we should do? Should we use different meat? I wonder how that would work? Should we wait until tomorrow because we can buy take out tonight? Or maybe I could run to the store and buy it?" In other words, model fluid thinking and a positive attitude as well as a process for solving the small problems of everyday life. And involve him/her further by asking them to suggest their own solutions.

**Be willing to make mistakes.** It is reassuring to him/her to discover that adults make mistakes too. So let him/her see some of the mistakes you make, then ask them to help you solve the resulting problems. They feel important and, at the same time, learn that making mistakes isn't really such a bad thing after all. Instead, it's an opportunity for learning.