

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.

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.

February

Your Role...

You help foster problem solving not so much by providing special materials or specific activities but by having a responsive, accepting attitude.

Here are other key ways to facilitate your young adult's growth:

- **Follow his/her lead.** By observing his/her interactions and dilemmas, you can support their problem-solving efforts and help them accomplish their goals.
- **Reinforce his/her solutions.** Let him/her know that their ideas and efforts are valued.
- **Extend creative thinking and problem solving.** Ask open-ended questions about activities to help children see the problem they are trying to solve in new and different ways.
- **Challenge.** Encourage your daughter or son to practice critical and logical thinking by asking them open-ended questions, such as "How many ways can you make this _____?" "How many different ways can you get to work or school?" "How would traveling be different if taken by a car, bus, or by train?"
- **Listen.** Asking questions about things that don't make sense is another way children express critical thinking. When a child wonders, "Why do I have a shadow on the playground but not inside?" or "Why can't I see the wind?" you don't need to respond with one right answer. Instead, encourage children to express their ideas.

March

Practice Solving Problems!

When problems arise, don't rush to solve your child's problems for him. Instead, help him walk through the problem-solving steps. Offer guidance when he needs assistance, but encourage him to solve problems on his own.

If he's unable to come up with a solution, step in and help him think of solutions. But don't automatically tell him what to do.

You can also use a problem-solving approach to help your child become more independent. If she forgot to pack her wallet for an outing, ask, "What can we do to make sure this doesn't happen again?" Let her try and develop some solutions on her own.

Young adults often develop creative solutions. So she might say, "I'll write a note and stick it on my door so I'll remember to pack them before I leave," or "I'll pack my bag the night before and I'll keep a checklist to remind me what needs to go in my bag."

Provide plenty of praise when your young adult practices his or her problem-solving skills.

April

Allow for Natural Consequences

Natural consequences may also teach problem-solving skills. So when it's appropriate, allow your young adult to face the natural consequences of his action. Just make sure it's safe to do so.

For example, let your young adult spend all of his money during the first 10 minutes you're at an amusement park if that's what he wants. Then, let him go the rest of the day without any spending money.

This can lead to a discussion about problem-solving to help her make a better choice next time. Consider these natural consequences as a teachable moment to help work together on problem-solving.

Ask your young adult these three questions to help him or her start to realize how their behavior affected the outcome of the situation. Once they work through it, they'll be more likely to make a different choice in the future. The questions are:

1. What part did you play in this?
2. What are you going to do differently next time?
3. What did you learn from this?

May

Raise Their Efforts vs. the Result

As humans, we do not magically solve every problem the right way, nor is there one solution to a problem. Praise a young adult for their efforts & when there is success you can highlight the result!

“I can see how hard you are working to figure this out!”

“You really put a lot of effort into this!”

“I bet you are glad you didn’t give up. Your determination helped you solve the problem!”

“I knew you could figure it out!”

“I can imagine how good you must feel about completing this.”

Learning to solve problems is an essential life skill. Strengthening these skills not only allows young adults to gain independence and self-confidence, it also primes them for success in academic learning, leadership, social relationships, athletics, finances, health, leisure skills and all other areas of life.

June

Supporting Speaking Up: Helping Your Young Adult Self-Advocate

How can parents support self-advocacy?

Decision making is hard. Making big decisions can still be a new and scary experience for young adults. Young adults might not have the right words to ask for what they need. Parents help young adults become competent in self-advocacy by creating spaces where youth feel comfortable practicing their self-advocacy skills and knowledge. Building these skills together involves a number of different steps:

Point it out

It is likely that your young adult is already making choices and regularly advocating for themselves in small ways. Has your young adult asked for explanations from a coach or teacher about something they didn't understand? Has your young adult ask for more responsibility or a new freedom and explained why this was important to them? These are all simple, daily behaviors that represent self-advocacy. Point these instances out, commend him or her for being a self-advocate and be sure to label the skills you're seeing him or her use in their efforts.

Start early

If you've ever tried to select a restaurant with a group of people, you'll probably agree that even simple decision-making can be difficult when shared. It is never too early to start *sharing* decision-making power with your young adult but be mindful of your young adult's level of maturity and the decisions that are being made.

A fun way to share decision making is by letting your young adult suggest where the next family vacation (or a family day trip) should be. Suggest that they come up with a persuasive argument for why they chose a particular destination, how it will work with other family member's interests and how they would plan to stay within a budget. Sharing "little" decisions gives young adults practice with the skills they'll need to tackle the big stuff when it happens.

Practice speaking-up

Sometimes knowing the right things to say is not enough. Speaking up for yourself can be scary, especially if a young adult is advocating to adults. Just like a muscle, advocacy needs to be exercised to grow and strengthen. Practicing advocating for an effort, goal, or need can help make the process more comfortable for young adults. Offer to *listen* to your him or her practice their pitch for something. If they want feedback, provide constructive insights into what they did well and how they can improve. Sometimes even saying the words out loud in a safe space makes it easier to say in more high-stress environments.

Ask for their opinions and allow them to participate in 'adult' conversations. Model the language of *needs* by sharing with them your own when appropriate. For example, you can tell your young adult, "I have a headache and it's making it hard to keep my cool. I need to take a walk outside until it subsides and then we can come back to this conversation." If young adults fumble in their request for something, take it as an opportunity to reflect back to them what you see as their needs or ask clarifying questions to give them an opportunity to practice forming their ideas.