

Problem-solving with teenagers

As children become teenagers, they'll come across problems they need to sort out themselves. You won't always be there to give your child advice, but you can help him develop skills and strategies so he can solve problems on his own.

✓ [Six steps to solving problems](#)

✓ [When conflict is the problem](#)

Everybody needs to solve problems every day. But we're not born with the skills we need to do this – we have to develop them.

When solving problems, it's good to be able to:

- [listen](#) and think calmly
- consider options and other people's needs
- find constructive solutions and, sometimes, work towards compromises.

These abilities are highly valued in both social and work situations – they're skills for life.

When teenagers learn skills and strategies to sort out problems and resolve conflicts by themselves, they feel more confident and independent. They're also better placed to make good decisions on their own.

Six steps to solving problems

Problems can often be solved by talking and compromising. The following six steps are useful when you can't find a solution, and can be used to work on most problems – both yours and your child's.

You might like to download and use our [problem-solving worksheet](#) (PDF: 121kb) – it can help you come up with a solution together by guiding you through the process step by step.



When you're working on a problem with your child, it's a good idea to do it when everyone's calm and can think clearly – this way, your child will be more likely to want to find a solution. Try to find a time when you won't be interrupted.



did you know ?

Research shows that teenagers tend to do better psychologically when they're in environments that encourage conflict resolution and problem-solving.

1. Identify the problem

The first step is to work out exactly what the problem is. Then put it into words that make it

solvable. For example:

- 'You've been using other people's things a lot without asking first.'
- 'I noticed that the last two Saturdays when you went out, you didn't call us to let us know where you were.'

Focus on the issue, not on the emotion or the person. For example, try to avoid saying things like, 'Why don't you remember to call when you're late? Don't you care enough to let me know?' Your child could feel attacked and get defensive, or feel frustrated because she doesn't know how to fix the problem.

You can also head off defensiveness in your child by being reassuring. Perhaps say something like, 'It's important that you go out with your friends. We just need to find a way for you to go out and for us to feel you're safe. I know we'll be able to sort it out together'.

2. Why is it a problem?

Help your child describe what's causing the problem and where it's coming from. It might help to consider the answers to questions like these:

- Why is this so important to you?
- Why do you need this?
- What do you think might happen?
- What's the worst thing that could happen?
- What's upsetting you?

Try to listen without arguing or debating – this is your chance to really hear what's going on with your child. Encourage him to use statements such as 'I need ... I want ... I feel ...', and try using these phrases yourself. Be open about the reasons for your concerns.

3. Brainstorm possible solutions

Make a list of all the possible ways the problem could be solved. You're looking for a range of possibilities, both sensible and not so sensible. Try to avoid judging or debating these yet.

If your child has trouble coming up with some, start her off with some suggestions of your own. You could set the tone by first making a crazy suggestion – funny or extreme solutions can end up provoking a more serious or feasible option. Try to come up with at least eight possible solutions together.

Write down all the possibilities.

4. Evaluate the solutions

Look at the solutions in turn, talking about positives and negatives of each one. Consider the pros before the cons – that way, no-one will feel that their suggestions are being criticised.

After making a list of the pros and cons, cross off the options for which the negatives clearly outweigh the positives. Now rate each solution from 0 (not good) to 10 (very good) – this will help you sort out the most promising solutions.

The solution you choose should be one that can be put into practice and will solve the problem. If you haven't been able to find one, go back to step 3 and look for some different solutions. You might find it helpful to talk to other people, such as other family members, to get a fresh range of ideas.



Sometimes you might not be able to find a solution that makes you both happy. But by compromising, you should be able to find a solution you can both live with.

5. Put the solution into action

Once you've agreed on a solution, plan exactly how it will work. It can help to do this in writing, and to include the following points:

- Who will do what?
- When will they do it?
- What's needed to put the solution into action?

You could also talk about when you'll meet again to look at how the solution is working.

Your child might need some role-playing or coaching to feel confident with her solution. For example, if she's going to try to resolve a fight with a friend, she might find it helpful to practise with you what she's going to say.

6. Evaluate the outcome

Once your child has put the plan into action, you need to check how it went.

There might be hiccups or obstacles along the way, so you'll need to give the solution time to work. Also remember that not all solutions will work. Sometimes you'll need to try more than one solution. Part of effective problem-solving is being able to adapt when things don't go as well as expected.

Ask your child the following questions:

- What has worked well?
- What hasn't worked so well?
- What could you/we do differently to make the solution work more smoothly?

If the solution hasn't worked, go back to step 1 of this problem-solving strategy and start again. Perhaps the problem wasn't what you thought it was, or the solutions weren't quite right.



Try to use these skills and steps when you have your own problems to solve or decisions to make. If your child sees you actively dealing with problems using this approach, he might be more likely to try it himself.

When conflict is the problem

During adolescence, you might clash with your child more often than you did in the past. You might disagree about a range of issues, especially your child's need to develop [independence](#).

It can be hard to let go of your authority and let your child have more say in decision-making. But she needs to do this as part of her journey towards being a responsible young adult.

You can use the same problem-solving steps to handle conflict. There are more tips in our article on [managing conflict](#).

For example

Let's imagine that you and your child are in conflict over a party at the weekend.

You want to:

- take and pick up your child
- check that an adult will be supervising
- have your child home by 11 pm.

Your child wants to:

- go with friends
- come home in a taxi
- come home when she's ready.

How do you reach an agreement that allows both of you to get some of what you want?

The problem-solving strategy described above can be used for these types of conflicts. You might want to download our [example problem-solving worksheet](#) (PDF doc: 185kb), which has been filled in to show how you could come up with a solution to the problem above. It follows these steps:

1. Identify the problem

Put the problem into words that make it workable. For example:

- 'You want to go to a party with your friends and come home in a taxi.'
- 'I'm worried there will be a lot of kids drinking at the party, and you don't know whether any adults will be present.'
- 'When you're out, I worry about where you are and want to know you're OK. But we need to work out a way for you to be able to go out with your friends, and for me to feel comfortable that you're safe.'

2. Identify what's driving the problem

Find out what's important for your child and explain what's important from your perspective. For example, you might ask, 'Why don't you want to agree on a specific time to be home?' Then listen to your child's point of view.

3. Brainstorm possible solutions

Be creative and aim for at least four solutions each. For example, you might suggest picking your child up, but she can suggest what time it will happen. Or your child might say, 'How about I share a taxi home with two friends who live nearby?'

4. Evaluate the solutions

Look at the pros and cons of each solution, starting with the pros. It might be helpful to start by crossing off any solutions that aren't acceptable to either of you. For example, you might agree that your child taking a taxi home alone is not a good idea.

You might prefer to have some clear rules about time – for example, your child must be home by 11 pm unless otherwise negotiated. Be prepared with a back-up plan in case something goes wrong, such as if the designated driver is drunk or not ready to leave. Discuss the back-up plan with your child.

5. Put the solution into action

Once you've reached a compromise and have a plan of action, you need to make the terms of the agreement clear. It can help to do this in writing, including notes on who will do what, when and how.

6. Evaluate the outcome

After trying the solution, make time to ask yourselves if it worked and whether the agreement was fair.



By putting time and energy into developing your child's problem-solving skills, you're sending the message that you value your child's input into decisions that affect his life. This can enhance your relationship with your child.

Rated ★★★★★ (6 ratings)

More to explore

- ▶ Tricky conversations
- ▶ Active listening
- ▶ Teenagers and family relationships
- ▶ Shifting responsibility to your child

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