

# Is it a Discipline Issue or a Development Issue?

## Part 2 - Problem-solving with young children

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In the last issue, we talked about toddler behaviour and the importance of child-proofing and distraction. For older children's behaviour, problem-solving is now the first go-to discipline tool. But don't forget, problem-solving still works for toddlers and preschoolers. Problem-solving is effective for maintaining open communication, and understanding development as well as formulating creative solutions for solving everyday problems of living together as a family. Mostly, problem-solving with young children is comprised of the parent doing most of the "solving" but when children reach ages 3-4, they can help brainstorm ideas too!

Punishment is "me against you." Problem-solving is "you and me working together against the problem." Problem-solving teaches creativity, empathy, communication and accountability.

### EXAMPLE PROBLEM-SOLVING

#### 1. Your child is about to run into the road.

- Grab and carry the child to safety.
- Keep enclosed in the yard or house.
- Discuss car safety and road safety rules.
- Supervise constantly around vehicles and roads.

**Development Tip:** Children do not develop the visual acuity to judge distance and timing of vehicles on a road until aged 9. Children younger than age 9 cannot be trusted to control the impulse to run into a road to retrieve an item of interest.

#### 2. Your child is about to touch a hot stove.

- Remove the child from the stove.
- Supervise closely in the kitchen and keep the child occupied.
- Explain in simple words that stoves are dangerous.

**Development Tip:** Children must be supervised around cooking appliances until age 12, when they can comprehend the cause and effect of safety rules.

#### 3. Your child runs away in the supermarket.

- This could be a fun game for the child, but not for you. Corner and grasp the child, explain that this is not a game, and that you will not play chase in a store. If necessary, head home.
- Distract with a toy or snack.
- A shopping cart is harder to escape from than a stroller.
- Re-think grocery shopping. Could someone mind your child while you shop? Could you shop at night while your partner is home?

**Development Tip:** This is a temporary phase. Your child will stop running away from you by about age 5.

#### 4. Your child is in a whining stage.

- Ignore the whining.
- Request their "normal" voice.
- Model the "normal voice."

- Give the desired item instantly when the normal voice is used.
- When in a peaceful moment, ask for “inside, outside, whining, church, and normal” voices so they can tell the difference in voice tone, pitch, and variety.
- Pat your head and pretend you can’t “receive” when the tone is whiny. Pretend that the reception improves when the request is less whiny.

**Developmental Tip:** Most children stop whining around age 8.

#### **5. Your child draws on the wall.**

- Provide paper, and explain that drawings happen on paper, not walls.
- Get two cloths and a bucket of soapy water. Wash the wall together.
- Collect pens and crayons until you have time to supervise drawing.

**Development Tip:** Childproofing is necessary until about age 4 when children understand the “why” reason behind the behaviour they are not allowed to do.

#### **6. It’s time to go, and your child is unwilling to leave.**

- Catch and carry them out.
- Acknowledge feelings of unhappiness. Say “Are you sad to leave because you are having fun?”

**Developmental Tip:** Children learn to accept leaving a place of fun by around age 7.

#### **7. Two children are fighting over a toy.**

- Offer a substitute.
- Redirect to snacks.
- Encourage sharing, or taking turns, or flipping a coin, or picking names from a jar, or playing Rock, Paper, Scissors. Warn that there will be a winner and a loser, and confirm that they understand and accept that.
- Offer the first player a shorter time, and the second player a longer time.
- Hold the toy until an agreement is worked out that both children are okay with.

**Developmental Tip:** Siblings will have conflicts over many issues. Teach siblings to resolve conflicts respectfully, to help them to resolve conflicts in their future family and employment relationships.

#### **8. Your child throws food onto the floor.**

- Say “NO! We don’t throw!”
- Stay calm. Breathe deeply.
- Calmly, get a bucket of soapy water and cloth, and clean up the mess together.
- If your child is too upset to clean up the mess, postpone the cleanup until the child has calmed down.

**Developmental Tip:** Children are better able to manage their frustration around age 4.

#### **9. Your toddler has toilet accidents.**

- Keep up encouragement. Praise any tiny success.
- Show the child how to help you clean it up.
- Don’t punish.

**Development Tip:** Toilet training involves lots of misses. Most children train by age 4.

**10. Your child denies eating cookies – but his lips are smeared with crumbs.**

- Don't ask, "Did you eat the cookies?" Ask, "I see that some cookies are missing. Do you know what happened?" In the event of denial, say "I don't like it when people don't tell the truth. It breaks my trust."
- Reward your child for the truth.
- Promise that you will never punish if your child tells the truth.

**Developmental Tip:** Denial at the toddler age is not serious, since toddlers are in the developmental stage of "wishful" and "magical" thinking. Most children understand the abstract concept of lying by the age of 6.

**11. Your toddler rips pages from a valued book.**

- Substitute a magazine that you don't value. Get the child's attention on the substitute and then gently pry away the valued book.
- Childproof – don't leave books lying around.
- Work with your toddler to repair the book together.

**Developmental Tip:** Children are more respectful to items around age 4.

**12. Your toddler hits, pushes or bites a sibling or another child.**

- Provide attention, cuddles and comfort to the other child.
- When the other child has calmed, say to the toddler: "No! We don't hit people!"
- When the toddler has calmed, take the toddler to the child, and demonstrate how to make up – give a kiss, hug, say "Sorry", or offer a toy.
- Acknowledge toddler's feelings and say "You seem to be angry. We love you both, and you will always be with us."
- Give the toddler a teething ring and say, "We don't bite our friends. Here, bite this."
- Give the toddler extra attention every day, though not right after the "hit". Take her out on "dates" and lavish special attention on her so she can acquire attention in positive ways.
- Notice and praise when you see the toddler doing something nice for the other child.
- Don't leave siblings together unsupervised until the youngest child is 6.

**Developmental Tip:** Biting, pushing and hitting are typical impulses up to about age 4. As children grow up, they become less inclined to use violence upon each other. By age 7, hitting becomes rare, and by age 12 should end, as verbal skills improve.

**13. Your toddler runs away when you try to change diapers.**

- Catch and scoop up your child.
- Provide an entrancing toy.
- Don't waste time – be fast!
- Change with a movie.
- Talk, sing, tickle and make diaper-changing a fun time.
- Keep a box of interesting toys by the change station, to keep his hands busy.

**Developmental Tip:** Some toddlers are patient, and some are not. Children become more cooperative around age 4.

**14. Your child smashes another child's sand castle.**

- Say "No! We don't break other people's things!"
- Ask your child to apologize to the other child. If your child refuses, say to the other child or parent: "I'm very sorry, but my child doesn't have the words right now to say sorry". Model an apology that you give to the parent.
- Take your toddler away to calm down.

- When your toddler is calm, offer to re-build the castle together. Encourage an apology, but don't force it.

**Developmental Tip:** Children handle anger more effectively around age 4, especially if encouraged with positive alternatives for expressing frustration and anger.

**15. Your preschooler ignores your requests to pick up toys.**

- Make pick-up a game in which you both participate.
- Assign one task instead of the entire clean-up: "You collect the blocks, and I'll collect the crayons."

**Developmental Tip:** Until about age 12, most children require some direction, instruction, encouragement and help for most tasks.

**16. You are trying to work, and your toddler pesters you to play.**

- Play with your toddler for 15 minutes of your full attention.
- Interest the toddler in a toy, movie or activity, and get back to work.
- Join or build a network of parents of similar-aged children. Arrange play-dates.
- Rotate and pack away toys. Bring out a "new" toy box for each day.
- Postpone your work until naptime.

**Developmental Tip:** By age 3, children can play well with other children on play-dates, which can free up your time.

**17. Your toddler says "NO!" to your requests.**

- Offer choices between two or three acceptable options.
- Reduce your use of the word "No". Alternatives include "later", "not now, but you can have...", "Let me think about it".
- Acknowledge feelings. "You seem angry and don't want to try this?"
- Don't expect a child under age 3 to share possessions.
- Childproof your surroundings for safe exploration and discovery.

**Developmental Tip:** The "no" stage lasts from about age 1.5 to 4 years. This is a normal developmental stage for healthy children. Children naturally become more cooperative during the preschool stage.

**18. Your toddler is upset that you are leaving.**

- Acknowledge feelings: "You are sad that Mommy is leaving?"
- Leave a special item for your child to take care of while you are away.
- Develop a leaving routine: a special hug, wave.
- Kiss goodbye, and leave your child in the arms of the caregiver. Don't sneak out! If you sneak out, your child will feel insecure, and will become clingy.
- See if your caregiver can come to your house.
- Try to establish a routine: the same time, same place, same caregiver.
- Choose childcare arrangements with consistent caregivers, for development of attachment (and don't worry, you will never be replaced!).

**Developmental Tip:** Separation anxiety begins around age 1, peaks at age 2 and fades by age 4.

**19. Your toddler won't try new foods**

- Provide healthy foods from the four groups. Offer three meals and three snacks per day, about two hours apart. Leave the food out for twenty minutes and then clean up. Do not punish for not eating.
- Offer water between meals and snacks. Serve milk at meals.

- Allow toddlers to explore food with their fingers. If your toddler starts throwing food, meal time is over.
- Food jags are normal, in which the child eats only peanut butter and jam sandwiches for three weeks. That's okay. As long as it's a healthy food, don't worry about nutritional intake.
- It takes 15 tries to accept a new food. Have a one-bite routine. If the child spits it out, don't worry, and don't make it a power struggle. Children have sensitive taste buds, and their preferences will change as they develop.

## **20. Your toddler won't stay in bed.**

- Develop a routine - snack, bath, pyjamas, teeth, book, prayers, bedtime snuggle.
- If your child keeps getting up, consider two "bedtime excuse" tickets. Two tickets can be used for requests such as a drink, extra kiss, a cuddly toy.
- Each time, lead the toddler back to bed without talking, and close the door.
- Spend extra time to talk, read, cuddle and listen as part of the bedtime routine.
- When you find a routine that works, keep it up.

**Developmental Tip:** Most children under age 12 try to put off bedtime, because they don't want to separate from their parents, or to end their day. Parents find that a regular bedtime routine develops cooperation. Some families choose co-sleeping – however the safety of children under the age of one might be a concern.

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By Judy Arnall, BA, Certified parent educator, speaker, and bestselling author of ***Discipline Without Distress: 135 tools for raising caring, responsible children without time-out, spanking, punishment or bribery.*** Her new book, ***Parenting With Patience*** is now released.