



CARE SKILLS – Problem-solving skills

“Too often we give our children answers to remember instead of problems to solve.” Roger Lewin

Goal: Understand the importance of providing opportunities to learn and practice executive function skills and build language of choices and problem-solving into day-to-day conversation.

People who have experienced early trauma often feel helpless and feel they have little or no control over their lives. Early trauma can change the brain, interfering with the person’s development of executive function and self-regulation. The ability to be flexible, solve everyday problems, make choices, focus, handle disappointments and be aware of our emotions are all core skills we need to practice to be able to navigate life. Children and young people who have experienced trauma often are not even aware of the choices they make daily. When we are full of emotion it can be hard to slow down and make intentional and thoughtful decisions. Often, when children who have experienced trauma are faced with situations in their daily lives that require them to identify and solve problems or meet expectations, they do not have the skills to meet, it can cause distress and emotional/physical overwhelm. This is when we will often see ‘challenging’ pain-based behaviours.

The good news is that through sensitive, trauma-informed relationships and lots of opportunities for practice, children and young people can grow and develop their executive function and self-regulation skills.

Ways to Support Children and Young People to Practice Problem Solving

Increase a child or young person’s awareness that they always have choices. Notice and name choices as they occur. Help children recognise the many choices they make. “I see you chose to play a game instead of reading today.” Note when choices children make lead to successful outcomes, “When you chose to play that game with Joe, you looked like you were having fun.” Even doing nothing is a choice. “I see you are choosing not to react right now.”

Focus on the child or young person’s strengths and provide opportunities for small successes each day – giving children small experiences of choices and success increases their self-efficacy, and creates the conditions for positive growth and development.



Teach, encourage, model, and use the problem solving steps with children young people, and other members of the home. Timing matters. People must be calm to be able to engage in problem solving successfully. Start first by helping the person notice there is a problem and then work with the person to determine if he or she is in danger or not. *“Hey, it looks like something may be bothering you. Is it safe enough for you to take a minute and slow yourself down?”* If there is no danger and the person is reasonably calm, then move on to the problem-solving steps.

Problem Solving Steps

1. Identify and understand the problem

“Can you tell me what’s happening that’s bothering you? What are you hoping will happen?”

2. Brainstorm any possible solutions

“Let’s think of all the things you might be able to do in this situation.”

3. Evaluate possible outcomes

“What kinds of things might happen if you make that choice? What are some good things that might happen? What about not so good things?”

4. Make a choice, try it out, and see how it goes

“Which option do you want to go with?” “Did the choice you made work out for you? Do you want to do anything differently next time?”

Practice makes... well, not quite perfect:

Executive function skills such as problem-solving continue to develop into young adulthood. Children and young people will continue to need support with these skills, especially in difficult situations. Repeated guided experiences will eventually increase a person’s sense of control.

If over time, children and young people become more aware that they have choices, we know we are making a difference. We are aiming for children and young people to begin to recognise that their choices can lead to outcomes they desire.

Reflective Questions:

Think about the child/ren in your care, and identify a strength they demonstrate. How can you build on this strength to provide opportunities for little successes each day?

Reflect on the opportunities within daily activities to give the children in your care opportunities to practice important life skills. What is one way you can incorporate the problem solving steps into your daily interactions?