Parent Child Journey
An Individualized Approach to Raising Your Challenging Child

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Seventh Mile: Problem Solving

Problem-solving is our last proactive strategy for your behavior management tool kit. Problem-solving can be done by—and for—anybody:

- Parents for their own problems
- Parents on behalf of their very young or developmentally limited children
- Parents in collaboration with developmentally ready children (or other adults)
- Children for their own problems
- Children for other people's problems (including their parents!)

Martin Seligman's work on "learned optimism" provides some important foundational concepts. Across different settings, he studied how people respond to failure and frame their problems. Seligman discovered two self-explanatory styles; optimistic and pessimistic.

Pessimists tended to make self-defeating generalizations. They used words like "never," "nobody," and "nowhere." They viewed themselves as helpless and hopeless. Pessimists were guilty of committing "three Ps" of negative self-talk:

1. Pessimists took their failure **p**ersonally. ("I'm no good.").
2. Pessimists assumed that failure in one situation meant failure would become **p**ermanent across all future situations. (Things will never get better.").
3. Pessimists assumed that failure in achieving one goal meant that failure would be **p**ervasive across all goals. ("Nothing ever goes right for me.").

In sharp contrast, when *optimists* faced failure, their self-talk was remarkably positive. Optimists tended to see problems as specific, situational, and solvable. They were more self-forgiving and hopeful. They avoided the "three Ps" of pessimism; that is, they did not take their failure personally, permanently, or pervasively:

1. They did not blame themselves; rather, they blamed an unlucky situation. ("Just a tough break.")
2. They did not assume that failure was inevitably carved in stone; it was just a temporary setback. ("Nobody said this was going to be easy.")
3. They did not assume that failure in reaching one goal meant failure across all goals ("Well, nobody's perfect.").

Three steps in the pivot toward problem solving:

1. Delivering the invitation: *Wait for the right moment and say, "Hey, remember when you wanted such-and-such?" (Empathic pause.)*

2. Creating cognitive dissonance: *"I guess that didn't turn out the way you wanted?" (Another empathic pause.)*
3. Pivot to problem solving: *"Well, I bet, if we put our heads together, we can solve this problem. Is now a good time for you, or should we do it sometime later? What would work for you?" (Invitation to problem solve.)*

How to problem solve

All cognitive-behavioral approaches have a common sequence of problem-solving STEPS. These simple STEPS can be applied to a broad range of issues. Children and parents can learn to use the STEPS to solve problems at home, school, work or play.

"*STEPS*" to problem solving

1. *S*ay what the problem is.
2. *T*hink about all possible solutions.
3. *E*xamine each possible solution.
4. *P*ick the best solution.
5. *S*ee how it works.

How to do the **"STEPS":**

1. **S**top and Say, "What's the problem?"
- Avoid pessimistic generalizations
- Avoid irrational thinking
- Define the problem situation in specific, solvable terms: "Do the five W's":
    o What is the problem?
    o Where does it happen?
    o When does it happen?
    o Who does it happen with?
    o Why is it a problem for you? (Or, in other words, how does it make you feel?)
- Think in shades of gray

2. **T**hink about all possible solutions.
- Developmental constraints
- Brainstorm
- Teamwork
- Anything goes
- No comments
- Always consider the status quo

3. **E**xamine each possible solution.
- Predict outcomes
- Rate possible solution using an individualized system

- Be realistic
- Accept different opinions

4. **P**ick the best solution.
- Encourage self-determination and self-education
- Seek consensus and compromise

5. **S**ee how it works.
- Anticipation
- Experimentation
- Evaluation, modification, and reevaluation

For anxiety, **"STOP"** and face your fears:
1. Scared?
2. Thinking about what?
3. Other things I can do or think to help myself relax.
4. Pat myself on the back for facing my fears.

Homework for the Seventh Mile

1. Try using STEPS (or STOP) on a problem of your own.
2. Consider your child's level of readiness for problem solving. How much can s/he be coached to do his or her own problem solving? How much complexity can s/he handle? Considering your child's Gander, how should you individualize your approach?
3. Whatever your child's level of readiness, start with a relatively simple problem. Coach your child through the STEPS. You might want to begin with something like, "What should we have for dinner?" Or maybe, "What should we do this weekend?" Once you've both got your STEPS down, you can move on and apply this problem-solving process to more complicated social and emotional challenges. Take it slow.
4. Remember: Some solutions don't work as well as expected. At first, the problem-solving process may not work as well as hoped. Try to view such setbacks as necessary trials and important learning opportunities; not hopeless situations or incompetence. "Error-less learning" is never as effective as learning from mistakes.