

PROBLEM SOLVING

What is this developmental skill?

Problem solving is the ability to identify a challenge, think of possible solutions, evaluate the likely outcomes, and choose an appropriate course of action. It allows children to navigate everyday difficulties, resolve conflicts, overcome obstacles, and adapt when things do not go as planned. Effective problem-solving draws on many other cognitive skills, including attention, memory, reasoning, cognitive flexibility, and executive functioning.

How does this normally develop?

Problem-solving skills begin developing in infancy as children learn through trial and error. Young children discover how to reach a toy, complete a puzzle, or ask for help when they need it. As they grow, caregivers support this development by encouraging exploration, asking questions instead of immediately providing answers, and allowing children to experience manageable challenges. Throughout childhood and adolescence, children become increasingly able to think through complex situations, consider multiple solutions, and anticipate the consequences of their choices.

How can neglect interfere with its development?

Neglect can interfere with problem solving because children often have fewer opportunities to explore, experiment, and receive guidance from responsive adults. When daily life is unpredictable or focused on survival, children may learn to react quickly rather than thoughtfully. Chronic stress can also reduce the brain's ability to evaluate options and generate flexible solutions. As a result, children may become easily overwhelmed by challenges or rely on the same ineffective strategies repeatedly.

What might this look like?

A child with problem-solving difficulties may:

- Give up quickly when faced with a challenge.
- Become frustrated when the first solution does not work.
- Have difficulty thinking of more than one way to solve a problem.
- Depend heavily on adults to resolve everyday situations.
- React impulsively instead of considering options.
- Repeat ineffective behaviors despite poor outcomes.
- Become overwhelmed by relatively small obstacles.

Parenting Implications

Children become better problem solvers when adults resist solving every problem for them. Instead, guide children through the process by asking questions such as, *"What is the problem?"* *"What are some things you could try?"* and *"What do you think might happen if you did that?"* Allow children to experience age-appropriate challenges and mistakes while providing support when needed. Praise persistence, creativity, and effort rather than focusing only on finding the "right" answer.

From Understanding to Attunement

Instead of thinking, *"They always expect me to fix everything,"* consider, *"They may still be learning how to solve problems independently."* This shift recognizes that problem solving is a developmental skill built through experience, not something children automatically know how to do. By remaining supportive, encouraging curiosity, and helping children think through challenges rather than solving them outright, caregivers build confidence and foster the resilience children need to navigate life's inevitable difficulties.